

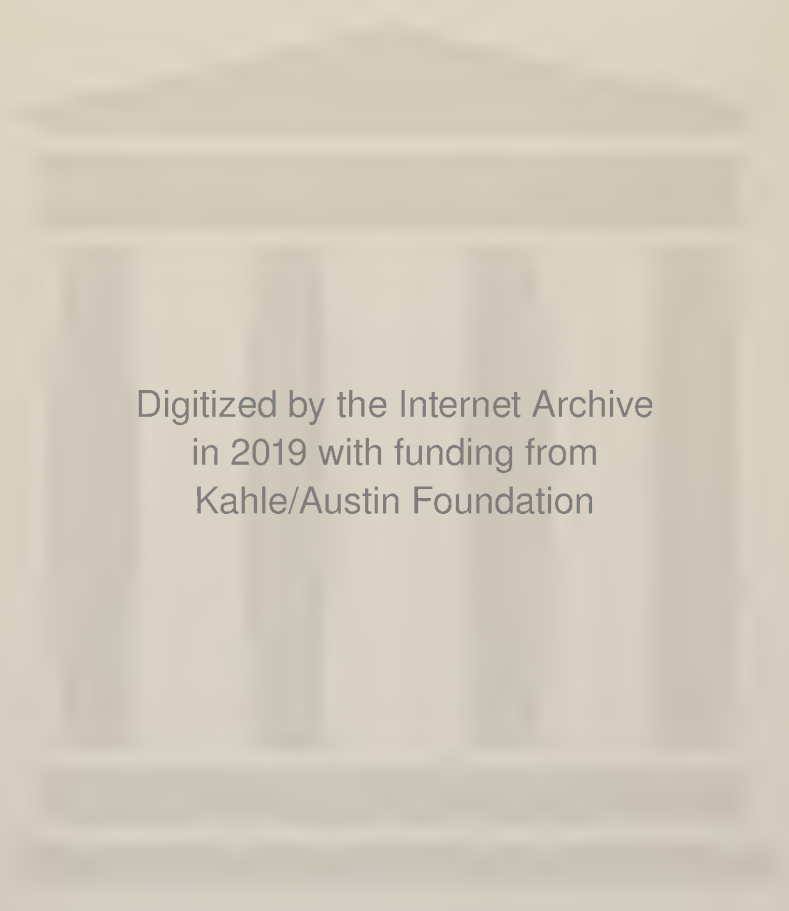
Life of
AMBROSE BIERCE

WALTER NEALE

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Life of
AMBROSE BIERCE

LIFE OF **AMBROSE BIERCE**

by
WALTER NEALE

*In Estimating The Relative
Altitudes Of Mountain Peaks We
Look No Lower Than Their Summits*
.....Ambrose Bierce



NEW YORK
WALTER NEALE, *Publisher*
1929

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To
WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST

Whom I have never met, with whom I have never been in communication, and who is unaware of this dedication; who flung open his newspapers and magazines to Ambrose Bierce when no other American publisher would accord to him recognition; who for more than a quarter of a century,—from dawn of the first day of their acquaintance until dusk of the last,—allowed him a free hand to write as he should please and to leave unwritten what he would; who was deaf to all traducers; whose faith in the genius of Ambrose Bierce never faltered; whose ample monetary payments were invariable and regular whether the mighty miller ground infrequently or not at all; who was endlessly patient,—at times under great provocation,—and could not be aroused to wrath; who, by publication in his newspapers and magazines of what Ambrose Bierce wrote, contributed more of value to the literature of his time than did any other publisher; who, without consideration other than affection, transferred all his copyright holdings and other proprietary rights in the published scripts of Ambrose Bierce to that author in order that his *Collected Works* might be issued and American Letters invaluablely enriched; whose soul (though many be his sins) shall be shrived because of his generous treatment of Ambrose Bierce,—to William Randolph Hearst this book (in sheer gratitude) is dedicated by

THE AUTHOR.

AMBROSE BIERCE

What though false gods a cheated world infest
With ignorance, fraud, artifice, pretense,
And through long ages and by insolence
Have by their tyrant-creed held man opprest
'Neath force that Nature's mandates ne'er profest,—
When comes one armed with stylus as a flail
To whip from Prud'ry's face her unclean veil
And smash false Wisdom's lamp with ribald jest?
Thou sapient mocker, sick of outworn lore,
Who won from "Sin" man's keenest ecstasy;
Who reason drew from Folly's richest ore
And flouted "Virtue's" smug hypocrisy;
Thou rogue, who filched from every sage's store
And clipped the soaring wings of Fallacy!

WALTER NEALE.

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INTRODUCTORY

I

SINCE the life of Ambrose Bierce and mine came into contact at many points over a long period of years, embracing the ripest period of his life and terminating only at his death, it would seem desirable that I should be introduced to those among my readers to whom I am unknown, and particularly to generations yet unborn; for I believe that Ambrose Bierce will endure in literature as long as our present civilization lasts—perhaps longer—and it would seem desirable that an authoritative account of his biographer be made known.

But in thus presenting myself I shall do violence to both tradition and practice. Ordinarily a biographer engages some friend to write an introduction to his book, as laudatory as decency permits, recounting his achievements; or, he employs some professional scribe to write the introduction for him; and, even more frequently, the biographer virtually writes the introduction himself, then gets some distinguished person to sign it. All this is according to literary Hoyle. I prefer to make this a brief introductory autobiographical sketch, so far as it concerns me; for it I alone am responsible. Thus all the "bad taste" is mine. And I am strong enough and my hide is thick enough to survive every assault. So to the fray:

II

I am an aristocrat. Frankly I admit it: an aristocrat by birth, rearing, and education. Furthermore, I believe in an aristocratic form of government, and in an hereditary monarchy. These affirmations will astound and inexpressibly shock some of my readers. Perhaps I am the last American

aristocrat so foolish as to confess to a crime so infamous as is this arrogant assertion. Yet, I feel no sense of shame, and I actually believe the aristocrat to be mentally, physically, and morally superior to the man whose ancestors for countless generations have been louts, largely unacquainted with the decencies of life, and seldom so highly evolved as to reach the plane of mediocrity. As an aristocrat I may be unworthy; but an aristocrat I am; and after this unblushing admission, those who are disinclined to read further have my gracious permission to cast this volume aside.

Again I shall go contrary to current practice, for I shall give some account of my ancestors, and I shall exhibit some of my feeling of pride in them. All this would be quite proper and in accordance with the standards of our time if my ancestors had been of lowly life,—villains, peasants, or yeomen; if politically they had been either communists or anarchists, that would be all right; I should be justified in referring to them with pride. But it so happens that I am of gentle birth, that many of my forebears were men and women of distinction, and many of great achievement. Better forget my descent!

Moreover, it will be said by some that I am trying to soar through life on the wings of my forebears instead of hopping off in an ancestral airplane of my own construction. Now, I have never known anybody of gentle birth to exploit his ancestors for his own aggrandizement; but the impression is ineradicable that the chief occupation of persons of good lineage and rearing is to loiter through life talking incessantly about the importance of their ancestors, yet incapable of emulating them, and being altogether unworthy of their heritage. In this connection I reaffirm that I alone am accountable for the "bad taste" displayed in this introduction; I assume all the blame; I shall not fasten it upon either a friend or a vocational scribe.

But be not alarmed: he of the thirteenth generation has four thousand and ninety-six ancestors of different degrees: two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, sixteen great-great-grandparents, and so on back. However much I may disgrace them, or have done so already, I know of no instance in which they have shamed me. I shall refer to only a few American branches of my family.

I am directly descended from Captain Charles Neale, of the Royal Army, *circa* 1650 in Virginia, and am of the eighth generation. The old Colonial mansion of the Neale family, "Morattico Hall," is still in a state of excellent preservation, in Richmond County, Virginia. The Neales took a prominent part in all the political and military affairs of their Colony and State from the time of their arrival on this continent to the present day. The history of the family in England has been written by several historians. In the volume entitled *Charters and Records of the Neales of Berkeley, Yate and Gorsham*, by John Alexander Neale, we are informed that:

Neale Vicount of Coutances, son of Roger, in 996 defeated Ethelred (the Unready) at sea when the latter, flushed with his exploits in Cumberland, endeavoured to invade the shores of Brittany in opposing Robert of Normandy, father of Duke William. His son, Neale of St. Sauveur, in 1048 founded the famous Abbey of that name by his castle in the Ouve, where aforetime his grandfather, Roger, had consecrated a small college of Canons, and worthily upheld his father's prestige; but Duke William was rapidly increasing in power and pushing his domain westward. So in 1047 these two came into fearful conflict at Val ès Dunes, and after a gigantic struggle William prevailed. William was, however, not only a great soldier, who could respect a worthy foe, but a born leader of men of pre-eminent political foresight; and so the two were reconciled the same year: and later on Neale accompanied William to England, among the chief, if not the chief, of his supporters. (See pp. 6-7.)

I am also descended in direct line from Pierre Baudoin, *circa* 1687 in New England, who died August 18, 1706. Bowdoin College, in Maine, was founded by his great-grandson, James III, in 1794. I am of the eighth generation. The great-great-great-granddaughter of Pierre Baudoin was my grandmother, Elizabeth Upshur Bowdoin. The spelling of the family name was changed from Baudoin to Bowdoin by Pierre's grandson, James II. The bibliography of the Bowdoin family is extensive.

Judge Francis Hopkinson, one of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence, was my great-great-grandfather, and his first wife, Ann Borden, was my great-great-grandmother. His son, Judge Joseph Hopkinson, was author of the words of the patriotic song *Hail, Columbia!* Lossing, in his Introduction to *The Old Farm and the New Farm, a Political Allegory*, by Francis Hopkinson, says:

Mr. Hopkinson was one of the brightest scholars and keenest wits of his day. He was a native of Philadelphia, where he was born on the 3d of September, 1738. His father was an Englishman of polished manners and a thorough education; and his mother, a woman of great refinement, was the niece of the eminent Bishop of Worcester. They came from England immediately after their marriage, and settled in Philadelphia, and there Mr. Hopkinson became active in public life, with Dr. Franklin and others. He was one of the founders of the College of Philadelphia.

The bibliography of the Hopkinson family is also extensive.

For hundreds of years each generation has produced a writer of distinction. Francis Hopkinson Smith, for example, was a descendant of Francis Hopkinson, the Signer. "Hop" Smith and I had the same great-grandfather, Isaac Smith III, who married Maria Hopkinson, daughter of Francis Hopkinson and his wife Ann Borden.

Sir George Yeardley, born between 1577 and 1580, died November 14, 1627, and Temperance West, who came to

America *circa* 1609, married *circa* 1618, were my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandparents, I being of the eleventh generation in America; hence, my grandchildren are of the thirteenth. Probably there is no other family of so many generations American born. Sir George Yeardley was Deputy-Governor of Virginia from April, 1616, to May, 1617; Governor and Captain-General from April 19, 1619, to November 8, 1621, and from May 17, 1626, to November 14, 1627, dying while in that office. In June, 1619, he summoned the first legislative assembly ever convened in America, which met at Jamestown, July 30, 1619. Numerous books on the Yeardley family and Sir George Yeardley have been published.

In the Smith line I am directly descended in America from Isaac Smith I and his wife Sarah West, eighth child of John West and Frances Yeardley, who was the great-granddaughter of Sir George Yeardley and his wife Temperance West. I am of the seventh generation from Isaac Smith I. From my Smith ancestors I have derived my only pecuniary inheritance, less than the sum of one hundred dollars, paid on account of the French Spoliation Claims. The three Isaacs, father, son, and grandson, were merchants on a large scale, with a fleet engaged in trade with foreign countries, particularly with the East Indies. Some of these ships were seized by France when she was at war with England toward the end of the eighteenth century. The seizure came near to precipitating war between France and the United States; but war was averted by the coming into power of Bonaparte, who indemnified the United States.

In the Teackle line I am eighth in the order of descent, being the great-great-great-great-great-grandson of the Reverend Thomas Teackle, born in 1624, died January 26, 1695, and Margaret Temple Nelson, his wife, daughter of Robert and Mary Temple Nelson. The Nelson family is that of which

the hero of Trafalgar was a member. "Craddock," the old family homestead of the Teackles, on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, was still existent when I last received information from my former neighbors. Thomas Teackle became known as "Lord Bishop of Craddock Creek," head of the Anglican faith in "Ye Kingdome of Accowmacke," during the reign of "King" Scarburg (for an account of the independent nation of Accowmacke, a kingdom, see Wise's book in the list of publications further on in this chapter). The office of the Lord Bishop in "Ye Kingdome of Accowmacke" was not dissimilar from that of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Reverend Thomas was a forceful man. In order to hold his "blasphemous and slanderous tongue," his enemies, after capturing him, forced him to stick it out, then drove an awl through it in order to keep it out. It was not removed for several days. But the Lord Bishop never hesitated thereafter to speak out, and confounded his enemies by mitre, tongue, and sword. With him the Word was not the mightiest weapon. He was the first rector of Hungar's Parish. His father had been slain in battle while serving under Charles I, and Thomas, later being persecuted by Cromwell, went to Virginia in 1656. There he erected the "Craddock" mansion.

The ancestry of Margaret Temple Nelson is traced by historians, on the line of the Temples, back to Godiva, the heroine of Tennyson's poem.

Other branches of the family are equally distinguished; but I will desist, and refer my readers, if any should desire further information, to the publications entitled

Charters and Records of the Neales of Berkeley, Yate and Gorsham. By John Alexander Neale, D.C.L. Mackie and Co., Limited, Warrington. 1907. (Also 2 Wine Office Court, Fleet Street, E.C.) (N.Y. Pub. Library. Neale, ARZ.)

Old King William Homes and Families. By Peyton Neale

- Clarke. Louisville, John P. Morton and Company, 1897. (N.Y. Pub. Library. ITD.)
- Sir George Yeardley or Yardley, Governor and Captain-General of Virginia, and Temperance (West), Lady Yeardley, and Some of Their Descendants.* By Thomas Teackle Upshur, Nassawadox, Northampton County, Virginia. Reprinted from the *American Historical Magazine*, Nashville, Tenn., October, 1896. (N.Y. Pub. Library. Yeardley. APV.)
- Ye Kingdome of Accawmacke or the Eastern Shore of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century.* By Jennings Cropper Wise, Member Virginia Historical Society. The Bell Book and Stationery Company. Richmond, Va., 1911. (N.Y. Pub. Library. ITC.)
- Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia.* By Bishop Meade. In two volumes. J. B. Lippincott & Company. 1878. (N.Y. Pub. Library. ITC.)
- The Old Farm and the New Farm, a Political Allegory.* By Francis Hopkinson, Member of the Continental Congress. With an Introduction and Historical Notes by Benson J. Lossing, M. A., New York. Dana and Company, 381 Broadway. 1857. (In the possession of Walter Neale.)
- An Account of the Temple Family, with Notes and Pedigree of the Family of Bowdoin.* By W. H. Whitmore. Boston. Dutton and Wentworth. 1856. (N.Y. Pub. Library. APV.)

III

I was born near Eastville, in Northampton County, one of the two counties comprising the Eastern Shore of Virginia, on January 21, 1873. I am the elder of the two sons of the late Judge Hamilton S. Neale and Elizabeth Bowdoin Smith, who were cousins. My father was educated at St. John's Academy, Annapolis, Md., and at the University of Virginia, and began the practice of law on the Eastern Shore of Virginia shortly after he left the University. He was born in 1821, served in both houses of the General Assembly before the Civil War, and died while on the bench, after

sixteen years of continuous judicial service. "Going out of the Union with Virginia," he was twice wounded, and surrendered with General Lee's army at Appomattox. My uncle for whom I am named was killed in the Battle of Sailor's Creek, on the retreat from Richmond. Another of my uncles was made deaf for life by the explosion of a shell. All the members of my family capable of bearing arms, with the exception of F. Hopkinson Smith, who went to the North, "too proud to fight," were in the armies of the South. Later my father was one of the attorneys for General Robert E. Lee's estate.

My early education was obtained from my father and from private tutors and at the College of William and Mary. While at college I was called home by father's death. I took charge of the farm for two years and at the same time continued my studies under the direction of the Reverend George W. Easter, a man of ripe scholarship, who not only required me to do an immense amount of miscellaneous reading but tried his best (with indifferent success) to pound into me Latin, Greek, and the humanities generally. Two years after my father's death I removed to Washington, D. C., with his entire family, comprising my mother, one brother, and six sisters. There, in 1894, at the age of twenty-one, I established as sole owner the publishing house that bears my name.

Under my father's direction I had read Coke, Blackstone, Kent, and other law writers of different periods, and later I read case books of English law. Upon reaching Washington, I resumed my legal studies, under Col. Robert F. Hill, who served in the Union army from Michigan, and who later became a member of the Federal Board of Pension Appeals. I also attended law lectures at Columbia University (now George Washington). Under the late Hannis Taylor, formerly United States Minister to Spain, I read in

English and in Roman jurisprudence, also in modern diplomacy, using in part his own books. At one time I thought of following the law as a career. All its branches have ever interested me, particularly its historic growth from the early days of Israel to the present time. I still continue my studies in comparative jurisprudence. Of the books that I have written and published, one is on a phase of American Constitutional law, issued with the title of *The Sovereignty of the States*.

IV

My publishing house made swift progress from the start. With setbacks from time to time during the thirty-five years that have since elapsed, the forward movement has been steady, and at times rapid. I began by specializing in the publication of books relating to the South, and more particularly to the Civil War, written by Southerners. This field for many years had been neglected. It was virtually unoccupied when I entered it.

In 1903, somewhat more than two years after Bierce and I first met, I removed my editorial and executive offices from Washington to New York, retaining the Washington establishment otherwise intact. In the summer of 1911 I removed altogether to New York. But from the time of my going to that city, in 1903, until complete removal was effected, I went to Washington twice monthly, arriving there on the first and on the fifteenth, and remaining several days.

At the time the publication of *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce* was begun, in 1909 (since completed in twelve large volumes, comprising about 5,000 pages, in three separate uniform bindings), the Neale house had progressed to the point where its publications in active circulation comprised hundreds of different titles, embracing many branches of literature, such as history, biography, reminiscence, criticisms of literature and art, miscellaneous essays, prose fiction,

poetry, religion, travel, books for children, and volumes relating to the science of government. Military works alone comprised an important and a large library. These books were published in part in languages other than English, and the authors represented included, besides American, British, French, German, Russian, and Japanese.

Having said so much about myself—and far too much to be pleasing to some of my readers, no doubt—I will pass on to a discussion of some of the features of this volume, in the Preface that follows.

PREFACE

I

AMBROSE BIERCE has now been dead fifteen years. I reluctantly refused to write of him at an earlier date (I began this book in June, 1927) despite the repeated urgency of a considerable number of persons. It seemed to me that I was too close to Bierce, that I should wait to see him in perspective; yet, I should not delay so long that memory might become impaired. As it is, not a day has passed since Bierce died that I have not thought of him, and time has not altogether assuaged my grief at his loss.

I doubted, too, if I should set down, even for generations yet to come, my estimate of Bierce's character and my evaluation of his work in literature. I could write no mere pean. I would necessarily detach myself from Bierce my friend, then write of him uninfluenced by affection, as I would of some great literary figure of the Elizabethan era.

While I do not care particularly for the opinions of others as to matters of taste, propriety, and the like, I doubted if I should, as one of two parties to an intimate, long friendship, including almost paternal and filial love, disclose the thoughts and the words of Ambrose Bierce as they came to me from him. Would full revelations of his life, if full, be traitorous to that love and friendship? I have come to think not. Here are some of my reasons for this opinion:

Over a period of a number of years, immediately preceding Bierce's death, he frequently urged me to become his biographer. I never committed myself. I said that I would have to have a free hand, be entirely untrammelled in every way, and that I would be certain to write estimates of him that would affront his friends and disturb his own final

repose. The fact is, I undoubtedly impressed upon him that I would set down passages that would certainly offend him if he were alive. I offered to promise to write nothing, if he should prefer. But to this suggestion he would not hearken. He declared that if he were writing any man's life—mine, for example—he would go about it in pretty much the same way; that a man in assuming a public career, and particularly that of literature, was bound to be appraised by posterity—if he should be read by future generations—and that his character as well as his literary work would be truly evaluated. Therefore, he would rather have his enemies and his friends, as made by him during his life, both damn him and praise him to their hearts' content. The critics of the centuries to come would put him in his proper place.

I have no doubt that Bierce, if writing my biography after my death, would not hesitate to record his knowledge of me in much the same way that I now give expression to mine of him and to my opinions that I believe to be well founded upon my knowledge of the man and his work.

Among my confrères one has suggested that I write this life of Bierce now but not release it for publication until some years after my death, when all who knew him would be dead. Well, Bierce's only close blood relation now alive is his daughter Helen, who seems to have seen little of her father, probably having paid him no more than several brief visits in the fifteen or twenty years immediately preceding his death. Nor did he leave behind so many close friends that I should hesitate on their account. Besides, none among them is given to tears. I am the only close friend he had who is now alive.

Nor would posthumous publication solve the problem that has confronted me: Should a friend, even with the permission of his friend, reveal what he learned in close and intimate contact with him? The ethical problem would not be

solved by deferred publication. Nor am I of the type that would avoid any issue. My answer to the problems that have beset me is to be found in the issuance of this book. It could have been written by no other man. No other person among his friends, living or dead, was so closely associated as was I myself with that great genius.

II

In representing Bierce's thoughts and expressions in this volume I have used three methods: direct quotations, within quotation marks; the expression of his thoughts in language somewhat peculiar to his style, yet not so close to his very words as to justify the use of such marks; and quotation marks, used largely for the convenience of the reader, where the context shows that I quote from memory and do not use Bierce's exact language. I am satisfied that in every instance I have given the spirit of the dialogues and that in many instances the exact language as used by Bierce is recorded. To some degree, too, Bierce's style has influenced my own, as it has that of many other writers, although mine was pretty well developed before I met him or had read a line that he had set down. I have written many hundreds of thousands of words in my time, and now usually write several hours a day in the course of my vocation.

III

As to my treatment of the dead, I have been no more uncharitable to them than to the living, and in this connection I will add that I hold the views expressed by Bierce in his Preface to *Shapes of Clay*, Vol. IV, *The Collected Works*, from which I quote as follows:

. . . Of my motive in writing and now publishing these personal satires I do not care to make either defense or explanation, except with reference to those, who, since my censure of them, have passed away. To one having only a

reader's interest in the matter it may seem that the verses relating to those might properly have been omitted from this collection. But if these pieces, or, indeed, any considerable part of my work in literature, have the intrinsic interest, which, by this attempt to preserve some of it I have assumed, their permanent suppression is impossible; it is only a question of when and by whom they will be republished. Someone will surely search them out and put them into circulation . . . For the death of a man whose unworth I have affirmed, I am in no way accountable, and however sincerely I may regret his passing, I can hardly be expected to consent that it shall affect my literary fortunes. If the satirist who does not accept the remarkable doctrine that while condemning a sin he should spare the sinner were bound to let the life of his work be coterminous with that of his subject, his lot in letters were one of peculiar hardship.

Furthermore, I hold that when a man is dead, he is dead, and that he is just as dead a year after life left him as is Thothmes; consequently, I take the view that the man recently dead is no more immune to criticism than is any person long since one with Palmyra. One of my old teachers used to write on my slate for me to copy, when I was struggling with the art of handwriting, *Nihil de mortuis nisi bonum*; but I was doubtful; my infant mind recalled the apothegm of my Sunday-school teacher: "Of him who has lived in honor, naught of dishonor can be said in death"—and I think she was right when she said it, to paraphrase the late Captain Standish.

IV

Soon after being mustered out of the Union Army, Bierce went to California to settle, in 1866. He married on December 25, 1871, and shortly afterward, in 1872, he went on his wedding trip to Europe. London then seemed to afford unusual opportunities for a literary career, and there he stayed until some time in 1877, when he returned to the United States, for a brief visit—but where he remained. While in

California he contributed to the *Overland Monthly*, edited the *Argonaut* and the *Wasp* between 1877 and 1884, and for many years thereafter wrote one or more columns either daily or weekly for the San Francisco *Examiner*, under the title of *Prattle*. He was a mining engineer, an assayer, and a prospector, and practised these callings from time to time, in California, Colorado, and elsewhere. For a number of years he was employed as an assayer at the mint in San Francisco. As a mining engineer and as a prospector he saw Western life in many of its phases. There seems never to have been a time after he enlisted in the Union Army when he was not brought into close contact with men who were contemporaneously prominent in literary and in other art circles. In California and in Dakota, for example, Samuel L. Clemens, Bret Harte, Arthur McEwen, and Joaquin Miller were among his associates.

However, in this volume I leave largely untouched the phases of Bierce's life that comprehend his career as mining engineer, assayer, and prospector, and his social contacts while he was pursuing those vocations. Rather have I attempted to reveal the man in his ripe maturity, making use of events and incidents that left their impress upon his character and achievements, or that show the manner of man that in time he became. To do otherwise, to chronicle his life year by year, would be interesting enough, if efficiently done; yet to do so would be to extend this *Life* into two or more volumes. Bierce scarce lived a day that the events in which he participated were not of public interest; and of even greater interest were his oral and written comments on the human *carrousel*. His place was always in the center; his vision unobstructed; his tongue and his pen always agile. Limitations of space and the desire to present the subject of this biography in a single volume alone impel me (most reluctantly) to pass by without comment much of public interest regarding the man and his work.

V

Fully to comprehend Bierce the man, his methods as an artist, and the difficulties under which he labored, it has seemed to me desirable to dwell at some length upon the cultural status of his time, not only as viewed by him, since his judgment alone might not be deemed conclusive, but also as seen and set down by competent critical observers with whom he was associated. Therefore, the conclusions of critics so competent and eminent as Percival Pollard, Herman Scheffauer, and others are freely quoted. Any adequate Life of Ambrose Bierce necessarily would be a book of contemporary manners, of the state of culture generally, not in America alone, and of his herculean efforts to cleanse the Augean stables of American letters with the current of a dynamic criticism. That he measurably succeeded is indisputable; he was the pioneer, blazing the trail for others, who have since courageously walked in his path. He was the creator of a virile criticism; much that is fine in our letters now current owes its life to his influence: he is the father of critical American literature. He put forward American letters by centuries. This biography, then, is meant to be more than a life of Ambrose Bierce: it is intended to be in part a survey of a struggle against the false standards of a period.

VI

If many of the oral opinions as expressed by Bierce to me, and by me repeated in this book, would seem not to have originated with the subject of this biography, let me say that Bierce never claimed to have originated any philosophy; in fact, he held that no thought could be traced to its source; yet, any man was to be commended who, through a process of elimination, through selectiveness, abstracted the truth, then made it his own. So, in this book, I have repeated views expressed to me by Bierce that were not original with him. But were they first thought out and expressed

by Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Diogenes, Epicurus, Lucretius, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius Antonius, Pascal, Descartes—and many others whose wisdom met his own? Some have wondered if he ever read Nietzsche. I affirm that he did, and that he did so with disgust, holding that Nietzsche perverted the philosophies of the masters upon whom he drew, doing so in a manner quite satisfactory to the faddists. Bierce had little patience with those who claimed to have originated any thought. Every man, of course, from the most ignorant to the wisest, worked out for himself some system of philosophy based upon wisdom drawn from many sources; but unprompted thought was impossible of expression—or existence. Having separated the wheat from the chaff, having accumulated wisdom, all that any writer could hope to do was to express an old idea in a new way; forms may be originated; but not thought; it is *how* a thing is said that makes literature.

VII

Numerous articles on Ambrose Bierce have been published in newspapers and in magazines, references to him have been made in a number of books, and several brochures on him have appeared. They all teem with misinformation. In a few instances only have I pointed out such errors; for, to take them all up in detail in this volume would be foreign to its plan, and would deprive it of unity. Besides, a book would be required in order to refute, with proof, the many misstatements, false interpretations, sophomoric evaluations, illogical application of his ideas, distortion of facts, the relations of purported occurrences that never could have taken place, vitiation of his motives, implications of intellectual corruption, dishonest appraisals of his literary accomplishment, uncomprehending vilification of the man and of his aims as expressed in his literary work—

senseless derogation of an intellectual Titan whose measurement was beyond his critics' calipers. Where I have exposed these inaccuracies—at times such authors were vicious, at times merely ignorant—I have done so for the reason that the writers would seem to speak with authority because of their association with Bierce or their professed familiarity with his work. Even so, I have indicated only a few of the many false statements they have made. Some of the persons posing as "authorities" have already been thoroughly discredited; others among them plainly show themselves by what they have written as being unworthy of belief; at least one among them is notoriously unreliable; still another has proved himself to be undeserving of credence, although for many years dependent upon Bierce for guidance in the art of versification.

Let it not be understood that I am censorious of all in the criticisms of Bierce that have been published: far from it; for he has been intelligently presented by Scheffauer, Pollard, and a few others, although not comprehensively, and by none without many inaccuracies as to fact as well as to interpretation. I intend later on—a few years hence—to criticise the criticisms of Ambrose Bierce in a comprehensive volume, which will include a discussion of everything procurable about him that is worthy of serious attention, and in that volume I hope to controvert all misstatements and misinterpretations. Since I completed the writing of this biography, February 16, 1929, I have been informed that at least three books on Bierce by others are to be published during the present year. They will not be neglected in my book of criticism of Bierce's critics, biographers, and interpreters, and will get their meed of praise—or censure.

VIII

The title of this book might be *Ambrose Bierce*; or, *Ambrose Bierce as I Knew Him*; but either would be misleading

and would indicate a less comprehensive narration than is this volume. So, as it seems to me, while this *Life* leaves untouched long stretches of its subject's career, the most appropriate of possible titles is the one selected. After all, no written life of anybody recounts more than a small fraction of the subject's activities.

In the writing of this book I have been sorely tempted to reprint many of the letters written to me by Bierce; however, resisting temptation, I have included but three. I rather roughly estimate the number of letters that he wrote to me altogether at eight hundred, ranging from one page each to twenty pages or more. They embrace much of genuine literary worth. Limitations of space prevent inclusion of more than three in this volume.

Several volumes instead of one (volumes that would be as revealing of Bierce as this is) could be written if I were to take the time necessary to record the more interesting (to me interesting) events in my contacts with him. As it is, in this book, I hope, I have at least portrayed the general characteristics of the man, described the methods he employed in his art, and have reflected his opinions in numerous fields of thought. He is to me of tireless interest.

After all, I have written this *Life* mainly for my own pleasure and as a duty to posterity, without much thought of the living, who (with but few exceptions) have been neither just nor generous in their treatment of one who, in time, must take rank as the foremost prose writer that this continent so far has produced. That is my opinion. I have not the least concern as to whether it is held by others. Nobody is obliged to read what I have written, and all those who do read have *carte blanche* from me, even if not needed, to damn me and this volume to their hearts' content. Meanwhile: *Vale et valet!*

FEBRUARY 16, 1929.

W. N.

CHAPTER I

HIS BACKGROUND

I

BIERCE told me (and oft repeated) that he was born on a farm in the Western Reserve, in Ohio, and had there remained until he was about seventeen, when he tired of farm life, ran away from home, to Chicago, and had there engaged in free-lance work for newspapers until he enlisted in the Union Army at the outbreak of the Civil War. He said that he came of an old New England family, cultured, and of local distinction. From New England his grandsires, of English extraction, had migrated to Ohio, where he was born, in Meigs county, June 24, 1842.

The name Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce was given to him by his parents when he was born, and A. G. Bierce was his signature until shortly after his return from London, when he dropped his middle name. He discontinued its use long before Arthur McEwen in a satirical article referred to him as Almighty God Bierce. Yet, the story has gone the rounds for years that McEwen's *jeu d'esprit* got under Bierce's skin, and caused him to change his signature from A. G. Bierce to Ambrose Bierce. How absurd! Even if Bierce had not long before discarded his early signature, nothing could have pleased him more than McEwen's reference to him as Almighty God Bierce, and pleased he was.

I never heard him mention his mother's maiden name, nor his father's given name; but he did say that his father was a man of considerable scholarship, and had been private secretary to Franklin Pierce when that gentleman was President. His father's full name was Marcus Aurelius Bierce;

his mother's, Laura Sherwood Bierce, and both, undoubtedly, were of the gentry.

December 25, 1871, Ambrose married Mary Day, of San Francisco, a daughter of Captain H. H. Day, a mine operator, who was generally held in high esteem.

The pride Bierce manifested in his New England ancestry was quite apparent. One day, while at the Congressional Library, he came across an account of the Bierce family, and discovered that his forefathers in New England had been slaveholders; whereupon he gleefully wrote to me about his discovery, saying that he might now be considered a member of the Southern aristocracy. No doubt about it, he was really proud of his descent from slaveowners.

As a farmer's lad, he said to me, but probably to nobody else, he performed every kind of menial service common to farm life, and had followed the plow from sun to sun. Of this life he was hardly proud but not altogether ashamed: he knew that men eminent in all walks of life had once guided the plow and that the farmer's occupation had been considered honorable in all civilizations. But he had no liking for the life, and longed for richer experience, and thus he accounted for his *hegira* to Chicago.

The account that Bierce gave to me of his boyhood was in part deliberately untrue. His father *was* a cultured man; the Bierce family *was* prominent in New England at one time; and both his paternal and maternal ancestors *were* of the gentry. Again, he *was* born on a farm, and, no doubt, he had followed the plow. But——

He never ran away from the farm, to Chicago, and a great deal of what he told me of his early life was pure fiction. He removed with his parents from the farm to Elkhart, Indiana, and there he lived until he enlisted with the Indiana volunteers.

Not until some time during the summer of 1927 did I

learn the truth of Bierce's habitat and his career from the time he left Ohio with his parents until he enlisted in the Federal Army. In a letter that I received in July, 1927, from Captain Orville Tryon Chamberlain, who resides at No. 417 West Franklin Street, Elkhart, Ind., he said:

I notice you speak of Ambrose Bierce. I knew him well, a young man, at Elkhart, Ind., before he enlisted in Co. C, 9th Ind. Vols., and worked in Steeple's brickyard, and clerked in Faber's Restaurant.

Captain Chamberlain was a year older than Bierce. They were young men together in Elkhart, they both enlisted in Indiana, and they saw service together in the Civil War, fighting while together in some of the battles. In a further letter, written July 23, 1927, amplifying the one from which I have quoted, Captain Chamberlain wrote to me as follows:

In answer to your letter, I will say I think, but am not sure, that Ambrose Bierce, when a youth, came with his father's family to Elkhart, Indiana, from Warsaw, Indiana, a year or two, or more, before the Civil War. The family lived in a house owned by the Father on West Franklin Street, later owned, up to three years ago, by Elmer Felt. I never knew Ambrose by any other name than Ambrose . . . Ambrose worked as off-bearer of brick on the brickyard of George Steeple, in the then West part of Elkhart, and later in a combined grocery, bakery, restaurant, and saloon, conducted by A. E. Faber, where Ambrose personally served me my meals. I think his education must have been very limited, and mostly self-gained.

Says the Elkhart (Ind.) *Daily Truth*, October, 1922 (the day of the month is missing from my clipping):

W. H. Anderson [probably a resident of Elkhart] contributes a valuable addition to our comment last week on Ambrose Bierce, the late writer, who once lived here. Under date of October 10th Mr. Anderson writes as follows:

"I was much interested in your write-up of Ambrose Bierce in your last Saturday's 'Window.' I have been in-

terested in his career for many years because of its local association, and I believe I am in possession of some facts in connection therewith which may interest you and which did not appear in your account of him and his family during their sojourn in this community.

"The old Bierce homestead while the family lived here was in the Franklin Street property subsequently owned by Elmer Felt, the Elkhart druggist, by whom the house was completely remodeled and modernized. I think the street number is 522. Anyway, it is the first house east of Harry Kepler's residence, which is numbered 524. I had occasion to go to the house often years ago, and members of the family then occupying it were much interested in the career of Ambrose Bierce, who was a livelier memory here then than he is now, and seemed very proud of the fact that they occupied his one-time place of abode . . .

"Up to probably 20 or 25 years ago one of Ambrose Bierce's brothers was a baggage man on the 'east-end' of the old Lake Shore railway, and ran from here to Toledo or Cleveland. He made his headquarters here.

"He was a well-known figure about the main portion of our city, and looked as little like the average railway baggage man as one can imagine. He was tall, well built, was always cleanly shaved, wore stylish clothes when off duty, had a shapely heavy brown moustache, and carried a light cane, which he handled very artistically when walking. He was a good-looking, rather dignified-appearing man, was very quiet, and apparently had no intimates. I never learned his name, but he was generally referred to as 'Ambrose Bierce's Brother.' I should judge he was a man of about 38 or 40 years of age. He gave one the impression that he was a good deal of a gentleman."

I am indebted to Mr. Maurice Frink, who at the time I write is the city editor of the Elkhart *Daily Truth*, for other interesting information concerning Ambrose Bierce and his parents. In an article by Mr. Frink that was published in his newspaper on October 30, 1922, he said:

Many years ago, before the Civil War, Marcus Aurelius Bierce and his wife moved to Elkhart from their home

near Youngstown, Ohio. Marcus Aurelius Bierce and his mate had twelve children, twin sons who died in infancy, and the following uniquely named sons and daughters who grew to maturity:

Abigail	Augustus
Addison	Andrew
Aurelius	Almeda
Amelia	Albert
Ann	Ambrose

Time and wars and the things that happen to families scattered the Bierces. Marcus Aurelius and his wife died here and were taken to Warsaw, Ind., where they were buried. Abigail, the eldest child, died in Africa—"in some kind of an army," old-timers here recall vaguely. Each in his time, the others passed away—all but one.

Andrew Bierce, at 85, still sits [he is now dead] the days away, his wife at his side, in the tiny square living room of a box-like house on a quiet corner in Warsaw.

To Andrew Bierce now and then come friends, and sometimes strangers, who ask about one of his brothers, the only one of the ten who won fame. For the youngest of the sons, Ambrose, one time Elkhartan, wrote some short stories that are listed among American classics . . . But few now living in Elkhart even know that one of the nation's finest writers played as a boy in the muddy streets of the ante-bellum village . . .

"It wouldn't surprise me if Ambrose Bierce were still alive," said one Elkhart contemporary of his, who knew him when he worked in "the brickyards west of town."

"Brose was that sort of chap. Never knew what he was going to do. He did so many things that surprised us that I wouldn't marvel much if he would turn up some day."

The same speaker went on thus to tell of Bierce's early life:

"The boy had what was called a 'poor chance.' He quit school early and went to work in the brickyards. He 'graduated' there in due time, and came downtown to work. Andrew Faber was running an establishment on Main Street in those days, a bakery-grocery-restaurant-saloon, and he took Ambrose on as all around handy man.

When the boys got together upstairs to play cards to see who'd treat, it was Ambrose Bierce who brought beer and sandwiches upstairs.

"Then Fort Sumter was fired on, and Elkhart was aflame with patriotism. Young fellows enlisted faster than they could be equipped and mobilized, and young Bierce was among the very first. He joined Co. C, the 9th Indiana Infantry.

"Then he gave his friends their first surprise. The army seemed to bring out in young Ambrose things that had never been seen in Elkhart. His education had been neglected, and he was always rather queer and different. But the first thing I knew he was a commissioned officer on the staff of General W. E. Grose, in the Army of the Cumberland. As a topographical engineer Bierce served throughout the war, with great distinction."

In another signed article, printed in *Edwin Valentine Mitchell's Book Notes*, August-September, 1923, Mr. Frink says:

Andrew lives at Warsaw, Indiana, with his wife. He knows little about Ambrose. The unpleasant truth is that the Bierce brothers were most of the time on unfriendly terms with one another, and Ambrose had little in common with any of the members of his family after the war. One man who knew them tells of a visit Ambrose paid back to Elkhart some years after the war.

One of his brothers was a trainman, and in response to a casual inquiry from Ambrose, the man who tells the story arranged that Ambrose should be near a railroad crossing when his brother went by on the train. The brother, as the train passed, was seen standing in the door of a baggage car beside a colored man. "H'm! He'd make a good nigger himself," was Ambrose Bierce's only comment as he saw the brother from whom he had been separated for years . . . The man who said his brother would make a good nigger seemed to find it easy to hate and to write accordingly.

Mr. Frink informs me that, shortly after his interview with Andrew Bierce, the old man died. Then died the last of Marcus Aurelius Bierce's progeny.

It is now clear to me why Bierce misrepresented his early life. He was ashamed of his lowly estate while in Elkhart. The type of saloon in which he worked was probably better than the ordinary grogshop of the period; but there he labored as a lackey, mopping up vomit, cleaning out spittoons, wiping off platters with a dirty apron, mixing and dispensing drinks when the bartender was absent, serving meals as a common waiter—but probably not taking the kicks and cuffs of irate patrons. Doubtless Bierce thought that this was no background for a man who longed, beyond all else, to become known as a gentleman, a scholar, and a man of letters.

II

At the time Bierce enlisted in the Union Army he had received but little education at schools. But he had read extensively in his father's excellent library, and later he may have read under the guidance of his first mistress, a cultured old lady, well past seventy when Bierce first met her, to whom I shall refer in another chapter. She was a highly gifted woman.

The war ended, Bierce had neither the instincts nor the manners of a gentleman; nor did his London experiences, which began a few years later, make a gentleman of him. He returned from England to America much of a ruffian and a lout in manner. This is not surprising: in London his associates, brilliant men as they were, nevertheless were, with few exceptions, brutal, uncouth in appearance, and thoroughly practised in the use of filthy epithets, by which they designated one another and everybody else; they were browbeating, vituperative, immoral, and steeped in many vices; they were intolerant while professing unlimited tolerance, evil, and drunken in a perpetual souse. Such were the men and manners Bierce encountered among his intimates while in London. Wit there was, to be sure; none without wit was

tolerated in this "select" gathering of as coarse a society of brilliant men as ever assembled anywhere.

He infrequently met men and women of culture immediately after his return to America, but had only slight intercourse with them; and, with a few exceptions, his associates, until he went to Washington, when past fifty, were (to be moderate in expression) short on culture if long on brains. He first tried to be a gentleman after he reached Washington. There, for the first time, he discovered that the blackguards' weapons were not held in repute and were but poor instruments with which to write. Thereafter Bierce did not publish, so far as I am aware, the type of personal abusiveness that had characterized *Prattle* for so many years. Poor fellow! He certainly had a hard time trying to create a gentleman during the brief period of twenty years or so that he lived following his hegira to the Capital City. Sometimes he used solemnly to say to me, in self-disgust after some outrageous lapse: "Neale, no man is always a gentleman; but it is unfortunate when he ceases trying to be one!"

III

Bierce had but little knowledge of any language other than his own during his early days as a writer. There was a time, he once said in reply to a critic, who had written that Bierce in his youth had "split the infinitive" and couldn't write good English—there was a time when he could not even sign his own name. Like Monsieur Beaucaire, he was born a baby, not a finished scholar, and had gradually acquired knowledge—an achievement beyond the capacity of his critic to duplicate.

Despite his lingual limitations and his lack of cultural attainments in his early years, he would even then endeavor to convey the impression that he was in command of numerous tongues, with an extensive knowledge of Greek, Latin, French, and German, and that his scholarship generally was

comprehensive. Indeed, in his advanced years, and until his last day, when he was in fact a learned man, a man of ripe scholarship, with extensive knowledge of a number of languages, both ancient and modern, and certainly a master of his own tongue, he would profess to be an authority on subjects of which he was very nearly ignorant. To hear him talk, the unwise would gather that his erudition knew no bounds. But frequently he was so unwary as to underrate his audience. Then, upon being oriented, would go quietly away, at times with ill-concealed discomfiture.

For example, upon one occasion he paused at my table at Harvey's, in Washington, where my companion at luncheon was a distinguished astronomer. However, when introduced, Bierce could hardly have caught my friend's name, for he (Bierce) began to point to an article that he had recently contributed to the *Washington Post*, a copy of which he held in his hand. Now, Bierce knew very little of astronomy; but he did know that the orbit of Mars was farther from the sun than was that of the earth; so he had written to deride the persons who were then clamoring for a device with which to signal to the Martians, Bierce making the point that the poor earthly morons might signal forever without attracting the attention of the inhabitants of Mars, if any, since at no time would they be able to see the earth, engulfed in sunlight. If he had said that the light of no earthly signal could have penetrated the earth's atmosphere, that because of that same atmosphere no creature on Mars could have seen the surface of our planet through the most powerful telescope, he might have been on solid ground. I don't know; I am no scientist. My astronomer friend put Bierce right in a sentence, and that sentence revealed to Bierce that he had an astronomer on his hands; so he hastily made his exit. It was a long time before he heard the end of that excursion of his into the heavens. There were numerous persons in Washington who knew something of the solar system.

In his youth Bierce's pretense to knowledge of languages got him into embarrassing situations oftener than did any of his other assumptions of culture. As early in life as when he frequented The Mitre Tavern, in London, he posed as being



From Black and White (London)

a scholar, and what he wrote usually bristled with italics, representing Greek and Latin as well as the Romance languages. Here is an anecdote that he related—one of the few that he even whispered to me in which he was the butt:

One evening the literary group in which he moved while in London assembled at dinner in the old tavern, The Mitre,

in honor of Mark Twain, recently arrived from America. All the hosts except Bierce had got together a day or two before the banquet and had decided that one of the features of the entertainment, to amuse the guest of honor, should be an exposé of his fellow-countryman's claim to linguistic knowledge—this being their gruesome concept of a jest. Pretense must be banished from that group. So, at the proper time, over the cigars and liqueurs, one of the Englishmen, Tom Hood the Younger, arose and paid a glowing tribute to Ambrose Bierce, that young American of deep learning, rare scholarship, matchless imagination, incomparable wit, whose only peers were the distinguished guest and the late Edgar Allan Poe.

"And now, Major Bierce," said he, "I have taken the liberty of bringing with me a copy of your latest book, and will ask you to read aloud for our delectation that very great account of yours—" the title of which was never revealed to me.

Bierce said that before he began to read he had entirely forgotten that the tale gleamed with italics. Greek, Latin, German, French—they were all there. He had outdone himself. All unmindful of the italics, the proudest moment of his life had come: he was to read aloud to that brilliant assemblage one of his own narrations. He began, his voice now *dolce*, now *crescendo*, now *fortissimo*, and always in rare cadence. He was at his best. When lo!—he turned a page, and there, shining like the eyes of a rattlesnake, were no less than four languages besides his own on the two facing pages. Not only could he pronounce no single word of the four tongues, but he knew the meaning of none, nor had known for more than a few minutes after he had painstakingly culled the words from a book of foreign words and phrases. Before he could reach the first foreign devil, he broke into a cold sweat, trembled like an aspen, and lost

consciousness. Not that he fell to the floor in a faint, but he lost sense of his surroundings up to the point when he was aroused by peals of laughter and shouts of derision, in which Mark Twain joined. He hated Clemens for the rest of his life.

But this incident did not cure Bierce of the baneful disease of foreign words and phrases—an incurable malady, whether contracted by the one-language man or the linguist.

IV

From his youth until the end of his days Bierce was beset by a false sense of educational deficiency. To a greater degree than any other intellectual man I have met, he was afflicted when in the presence of him who was possessed of a formal, college education with what Freud would have termed an “inferiority complex.” Elsewhere in this volume (*Bierce the Soldier*) I shall refer to his dread of the “formally” educated man, the man with a diploma, and, in fact, to his dread of everybody, in whatsoever walk of life, who had won renown—except persons many years his junior. Always he was either consciously or unconsciously on the defensive, fearing ridicule. He was aware that normal youth ordinarily reveres the person of advanced years—to some extent at least—so when with youth he felt the superiority common to those past the meridian of life. Hence, in his later years, he gathered about him a coterie of young men and young women, thirty years or more his juniors, who had known of him, had read much that he had written, and who were prepared to greet him as a master, to accept his instructions without question, and to treat him always with respect. They were brilliant young persons, these young men and young women, and at the time I write nearly all have won distinction in one or more of the different spheres of life—particularly in literature.

Doubtless there was another reason why Bierce gathered about him gifted young writers: they would be able to make known his work as an author and his greatness as a man and help to assure him a place in the permanent literature of the world. Long after men of his own age were dead, and he with them, these young authors, artists, sculptors, dramatists, and others engaged in different cultural pursuits would be alive, spreading his fame. His enemies dead (and very nearly all living writers that knew of him were his enemies), his literary work would be judged on its merits and, moreover, be interpreted by those who had known him personally.

V

Often Bierce has been described as being morose, disappointed, moody, sulky, and even given to self-pity, for the reason (the persons who thus described him would aver) that he had not received the recognition he merited. Some smart scribe, gifted in alliteration, fastened upon him the sobriquet "Bitter Bierce." He was not bitter, nor morose, nor disappointed, nor moody, nor sulky, nor given to self-pity. He was artist enough to know that his artistry was great; he was intelligent enough to be aware that he was gifted far beyond the common run of men; he knew that he had a superb mind, well organized, and that he deserved to be counted great among all the great who have inhabited this earth. Furthermore, he firmly believed that in time he would be so regarded by his peers—long after his death, perhaps, but in Time's own good time. What mattered it to him that the peasantry of letters worshiped at the shrine of—say, William Dean Howells, called by his contemporaries the "dean" of American literature—that "literary" peasants engaged in rolling one another's logs; that these same peasants sought the adulation of villains, the lowest of "literary" serfs? It mattered not at all. But he would smile as he passed by these humble toilers who were denouncing him, or ignor-

ing him, as they bent their backs under the commonplace burdens that they were bearing to the camps of other serfs. Moreover, he would infrequently lift his staff, whack the laborers on the head, belabor their halting haunches, and frown reprovingly when the astounded fellows would shriek out in pain. But if the benighted slaves of other slaves for one moment thought that by their curses they had wounded Bierce, they had but little knowledge of the man; and if any person who claims to have known Bierce personally refers to him as being a disappointed man, you may take it as a verity that he knew neither Bierce the man nor Bierce the writer.

George Sterling, who wrote several poems on Bierce, describes in the sonnet that follows the majestic calm in which Bierce stood among his vilifiers:

TO AMBROSE BIERCE

I saw a statue in the market-place—
 The guerdon of a life of noble toil.
 Austere shone the marble that should foil
 Oblivion, tho' the desecrated base,
 Round which the sullen huckster trod, bore trace
 Of dogs' defilement—transitory moil
 That expiating rains would soon assoil;
 But oh! the sunlight on that tranquil face!

What to the Titan were the mindless deed,
 Mire-born, and swiftly with the mire made one?
 No more than could the marble couldst thou heed
 The mongrel, and the hate of souls uncouth—
 Thou eagle that hast gazed upon the sun
 And canst endure the light which is the truth!

The only form of cancer from which Bierce suffered was inferiority complex, which afflicted him only when he was in contact with formally educated persons of his own age, or older, or of persons of great distinction even though, in point of fact, mental pigmies. In the presence of the diploma man

(but not when out of his presence) Bierce suffered. Lord!—if his enemies had only known of his weakness, his pitiful weakness, so utterly unwarranted! But they did not.

From my remonstrances, when Bierce would tell me how greatly handicapped he was because of his lack of a formal education, he got but little comfort. The absurdity, the incongruity of the whole situation, astounded me: that this powerful mind, superbly trained, should not know the true worth of a college diploma! He knew that but few bearers of it were educated men; but then, he was aware that in his day there were engrossed upon the scroll two words that he could never utter: *Open Sesame!* Those words opened many a door to mediocrity that was forever closed to him.

Of course Bierce had no real sense of intellectual inferiority; he knew the richness of his endowment, both natural and acquired; therefore, in my reference to his inferiority complex in what I now say, and in what I may say later, there is no intent to imply that he had any false estimate of equality: he had none. He did not care to place himself in a position to encounter snubs; and the college man of his day surely did snub, either directly or by implication, the non-college man. The college man was not so frequently encountered then as now; the small worth of his diploma had not then been so thoroughly exposed. Again, Bierce never cared to be placed in situations where he would be inferior in any regard; and he realized, and so told me more than once, that he credited the man of distinction, no matter in what field of endeavor, with the possession of knowledge superior to his own; rather, the man of distinction probably had given thought to matters within the domain of pure reason to which Bierce had given no consideration at all. He would say that in his experience he had found that all whom he had encountered assumed that his information and his erudition were bounded by their own, which always angered him, and

he declared that in consequence he was ever careful to avoid an assumption of fuller knowledge and wisdom than that possessed by the stranger within his gates. That he did not always exercise such care, goes without saying.

VI

Time came when Ambrose Bierce possessed the best kind of education and the only kind: the kind that is self-acquired. In time he had sifted the thoughts of men of many nations and eras. He had learned to weigh the thoughts of others; the best of the literatures of all recorded time had been read by him, in part in the original tongues in which they had been written, but in larger measure in translations; he had studied Latin, French, and Italian, and, to a less degree, Greek and German; history he had carefully examined and its written records largely discarded as being untrustworthy, and here, again, had used his sifting processes, separating the grain from the chaff. A profound student of religions, he had made a comparative study, embracing all the mythological and theological beliefs of importance. He had become a philologist, too, and had made use of his knowledge of the history of words in his examination of religions. At the time of his death there lived but few men of broader culture. Yet, to the end of his life, he would at times profess a knowledge of subjects of which he knew very little—subjects that he could not have been expected to know thoroughly. What a pity that he should have thus lessened the esteem to which he was entitled by reason of his broad culture and unsurpassed power of intellect!

VII

Such, then, was the background of Ambrose Bierce, destined to become one of the greatest writers of all time, whose imagination was boundless, and whose artistry now deservedly ranks with the best in the literature of the English language. That background was superior to Lincoln's, it was

as good as Shakespeare's, and, for all we know, was not inferior to Homer's. If in life he strutted, posed, and was not always what he represented himself to be, who among us shall cast a stone at him?

CHAPTER II

OUR FIRST MEETING

I

BIERCE and I first met at my place of business, in Washington, in the spring of 1901. He had called orally to flagellate the author of a book of verse that the Neale house had recently published.

"This 'poet' of yours," said he, "forced himself on me at my apartments last evening and insisted upon reading the volume you have issued for him, unmindful of my protests. He would not be denied. From the first word to the last—every word was read. Even as verse his stuff was intolerable—more uncouth than its author, if that be possible. The fellow is evidently trying to float on Jack London's unseaworthy craft, or one like it of his own construction; but he cannot even launch his rotten logs."

It seems that the "poet" had besought Bierce prayerfully and tearfully to write a review of his book. This finally Bierce agreed to do. "And I shall write the review," he said to me, with clenched teeth. He kept his word; and after the review had been published, came in to read it to me. I have never heard that the "poet" has written anything since. But the "stuff" was not so bad. Bierce had purposely exaggerated its deficiencies in order to punish the author for his intrusion and persistence. Six thousand volumes were required to supply purchasers. The allusion to London was due to that author's vogue at the time as a writer of the "Frozen North." The importunate versifier was trying to do in verse what London was achieving in prose.

The slap at London may be accounted for on the ground

of Bierce's dislike of that youth personally, which was based upon what Bierce considered to be London's moral deficiencies, his communistic proclivities, his tramp life, his previous jail habitat, and his tendency to weep over the great unwashed—to cleanse them with his tears. That Bierce really recognized in London a writer of excellent prose fiction, adroitly told, I have not the least doubt. In later years he admitted as much.

At our first interview Bierce revealed his proneness adversely to criticise (with the methods of a blackguard) any author for whom he had a personal dislike. Time would come, perchance, when he would meet face to face the author he had reviled and had unmercifully damned as both author and man and grow to like him. Then he would praise the very literary work he had previously condemned. This was true of London. After the twain had been drunk together once, staggering for a few miles, with their arms about each other's neck, I began to learn from Bierce that London was not so unspeakable a creature after all and that really much of what he had written would make him an enduring figure in the world of letters.

II

I had been glad to meet Bierce. For years I had read everything by him that I could lay hands on, and had counted him among the truly great—great not only as an author but as a man: great in many domains. By our first interview, my impressions of him, gathered from his literary work and my knowledge of his other varied activities, were confirmed. He made upon me a most favorable impression. Despite his blackguardism, his prejudices, his animosities, his intolerance of those differing from him in opinion, there stood before me reincarnate the Iron Duke as Tennyson saw him:

That tower of strength
Which stood four-square to all the winds that blew.

Here was a man worthy of any man's steel, rather provoking the desire, too, said one man, to run him through, for the pleasure of the thrust and to witness the reaction of the victim. One could not weep over Bierce. Tears refuse to flow. Nobody could associate the idea of weakness with this mighty warrior of stylus and sword. Compassion—that he had; but his beholder perceived no such quality. Nor was this lack of perception altogether the fault of the observer. Tenderness in him was submerged in a sea of virility; but it was there; and, like the periscope of a submersible, in part helped to guide the craft of his life. Furthermore, tenderness illumines much of his literature, and is the basis of one entire story, *A Baby Tramp*, which is without a peer in the domain of inter-related love of mother and babe.

III

From the time of my first interview with Bierce until his death a day seldom passed when I was in Washington that we did not foregather at least twice—in the morning or in the afternoon, and in the evening—some six or eight days a month. We would go on extended journeys together, by boat, automobile, and train. Long hikes were our wont, when we usually followed some stream, through some woods or meadow. Sometimes we walked over a battlefield. Thus, through a period of many years, our friendship and intimacy increased, and continued until Ambrose Bierce set out alone upon his long last journey.

CHAPTER III

HIS PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

I

AT the time I first met Bierce, shortly before his fifty-ninth birthday, he was a man of great physical beauty. So he remained to the day of his death. About one inch under six feet in height, his weight probably 168 pounds, he was compactly built, without surplus flesh; muscular, lithe, his was the figure of an athlete of thirty in excellent training. I should say that he was physically a perfect man. He never lost his boyish form, which probably appeared as youthful at the time I knew him as it was when he was a young man.

In fact, Bierce not only seemed the embodiment of life, he was life. If he seemed to wane somewhat both physically and mentally during the last six months of his time on earth, when he was in his seventy-second year, his condition was more apparent than actual, and was due to what he considered the fulfilment of his life's purposes, so far as attainable, and to the fact that he did not intend to engage in any further activities. The completion of his *Collected Works*, his retirement from all literary pursuits, and his final row with the woman he loved occurred almost simultaneously. He was done with life.

He seems never to have lost any of his hair, which, in great profusion, undulated in short waves, approximating two inches in length or more, and clustered as if detached from one another. The effect was strikingly beautiful. It was a golden yellow, and so remained, with no gray discernible, until he was past sixty, when, following the death of his only son then living, Leigh, it soon turned entirely white. Like his

form, his eyes, and all his other physical features, his hair gave the impression of unusual vitality.

His eyes were light blue, of a greyish shade, and the coloring of his entire body was a ruddy, healthy pink, almost girlish in its tones. Again the beholder felt a sense of vitality, life, in this coloring. Those eyes, under their heavy yellow brows, could not have been set better by an artist, and they were so set that Bierce could use them at will to obtain effects of either severity or tenderness. Nor did he neglect to put them to such uses. Unmindful of the physical advantages that his eyes and their setting gave to him in unconsciously producing terror, love, or hate in the beholder, nevertheless he aroused those emotions. His ears were perfectly modeled, and so was his nose, his mouth, and his jaw.

So far as I am aware, he never wore a beard; but in all the portraits of him that I have, ranging from the time of his early manhood to his latest photograph, taken the year he disappeared, he is shown with a moustache. His upper lip was thus decorated during all the years I knew him. The moustache was one of natural growth, not of the style ushered in by the World War, or by Charlie Chaplin, or whatever, or whoever, originated the uncouth hirsute bastard now in vogue. It was not curled, except as Nature curled it, as she curled the hair a-top his head.

His chin was strong, but not brutally so, and gave him an expression of determination. His brow was high, broad, and impressive, although not offensively so—not as if he were some Socrates, all head and no body.

His feet and his hands seemed to me to be in admirable proportion to the rest of his body; rather small, perhaps, but not too small. The back of each of his hands, but not his face, was at times slightly freckled. His fingers were long and tapering. I thought he had beautiful hands and feet, yet without the slightest effect of femininity.

He had no belly. (My emanuensis interrupts to suggest that this may account for the fact that he had no bowels of compassion.) His chest expansion was about three and one-half inches.

Attempts have been made by several artists, notably by Miss F. Soulé Campbell, one of the cohorts of the late Mrs. Eddy, to edit out of Bierce's face and form any suggestion of sensuality and masculinity, in order to show what he undoubtedly did reveal in both his face and his figure: spirituality. He used to compare such editorial operations with a process known in henneries, which results in that excellent article of food, capons. Nevertheless, he thought the portrait that serves as a frontispiece to this volume the best likeness and the best portrait of him ever made. Even in his moments of tenderness Bierce gave me no impression of effeminacy.

A number of writers (doubtless among them persons who have never seen the subject of this book) refer to Bierce's "red" face. Perhaps this was their method of euphemistically intimating that he was a drunkard. But his face never seemed red to me, even when he was somewhat flushed, and I have seen him often when his alcoholic content could not have been increased. I never saw him "pale" and I never saw him "red." Always he had the wholesome pink glow of perfect youthful health.

Indeed, health, vitality, life, seemed to be embodied in Bierce's physical structure. His height, his muscular strength, his lithe flexibility, his golden hair, his deep-set eyes, his strong chin, his muscular throat, the tonal effects of his voice, the conformation of his entire head, his resistless and somewhat sensuous mouth, his well-formed teeth, set in perfect arches—all combined to produce on the beholder the effect of a vital personality, the embodiment of the life-force. I do not go too far when I say that this current of force flows

through his entire literary work, in all its range, from trivial pleasantries to profound philosophies.

And the sum of his physical characteristics, in addition to impressive vitality, was exceedingly great beauty.

II

I never heard Ambrose Bierce sing, and I doubt if he could; but he used to say that, while he hated the piano, he would rather be able to play a violin with the mastery of a Kreisler than to write a poem as great as the *Iliad*. When speaking, his voice was musical and well modulated, even when angry; and when angry he spoke with deliberateness, with a drawl, and in even tones, giving the impression of affectation. I should say his voice was not uncommon; yet, it had some qualities of distinction, if none salient.

I hold that he was not an effective reader, although he did not make the error, so common to many who read aloud, of being dramatic, interpreting the author by inflection. I never heard him while he was on the platform. Others, who did, men of discernment, have told me that he made an excellent impression as an impromptu speaker at a banquet, or as a reader of his own verse, on the few occasions when he consented to appear in public. His voice had a good carrying quality, probably due to the fact that he put into practice his theory that vocal prolongation of tone is better effected if the sounds roll slowly, the sound-waves catching up with and pushing forward the preceding waves.

CHAPTER IV

HIS TEMPERAMENT

I

WHILE Bierce's high artistry as a writer attests that he applied diligent criticism to all he wrote, I have never been able to discover that he ever dissected himself. Precious little time, seemingly, did he devote to self-analysis. Perhaps he was too busily engaged in impaling or in vivisectioning others to waste time in a careful examination of the traits of one who had reached (in his belief) perfection. I used to wonder if he ever lived in close communion with himself so long as an hour. I could hardly bring myself to believe so. And so he impressed others.

If one were to take the mouthings of the hosts who have written about him since his death, persons who knew him but slightly in life and who have read but little that he ever wrote, it might be gathered that he was as tempermental as a prima donna and as difficult to get along with. He was not "tempermental" at all. He was not given to fits of anger; he always sought the roots of a situation; never in my presence did he display petulance, and usually he was mindful of the rights of others. In short, his mental processes were orderly, and he thought deeply, and with unusual clarity. Invective was a weapon that he commonly used, and frequently his were the methods of the blackguard; but his acts were seldom the result of uncontrolled passion: he usually employed selected methods to produce desired effects.

In all my close intercourse with him, extending over many years, I have never known him to display uncontrolled anger but once, and then his wrath was directed against me. He

particularly wished the Neale house to publish Percival Pollard's extensive criticism of American literature—a work that was soon afterward issued by that house under the title of *Their Day in Court: The Case of American Letters and Its Causes*. One evening I met Bierce at his apartment in Washington in order that he might read to me excerpts from Pollard's manuscript. In one passage that he read aloud Pollard had lampooned Edgar Saltus for his wordiness, saying that he was too colorful, that he would work over a situation until he nauseated his readers with redundancy, and would play with words until the reader's patience was exhausted. "Drunk! drunk! drunk!" wrote Pollard; "drunk with his own words!" And so Pollard went on, glass after glass passing his lips, drinking deeper from Saltus' own tankard than Saltus himself had ever dared drink; reeling in his intoxication; drunk till he fell in a flop. I interrupted Bierce, who by this time was as drunk as Pollard, by pointing out Pollard's own condition of inebriety. Bierce "got mad"; no doubt about it, he got mad through and through. I took the train at midnight for New York, and the next day received what I believe to be the only letter of apology that Bierce ever wrote. It contained but one sentence: "I lost my head last night."

Oh, yes; Bierce would get indignant; he would rise in righteous condemnation; but seldom in uncontrolled passion.

II

"It is the lot of all men of genius to suffer at the hands of mediocrity," Bierce would say; "and that is necessarily so. Let a man have a thought that transcends the commonplace, and he is denounced as being a neurotic, or a drunkard, or a drug addict. The expression of the thought can be explained in no other way by the aspiring peasantry. He is erratic if not downright insane, is the verdict of the more charitable.

At the least, the great writer is given over to idiosyncrasy, to eccentricity."

Bierce was no neurotic; he was no dyspeptic; he was as healthy an animal as I have ever seen. He was no drunkard, although at times he drank copiously, and even got drunk; he was no drug addict; he seldom smoked to excess. He was not given to eccentricities, nor was he erratic. Drugs he did not use at all. To no vice whatsoever was he a slave. Indeed, I would describe him as being a temperate man.

Bierce himself, the actor, was accountable for any reputation he acquired for being erratic. He would imagine a situation, then build a story on that flimsy foundation, with himself the central character. One day it occurred to him, for example, that "disintroduce" would be a good word for him to coin. Having invented the term, he proceeded to work it hard, and many is the yarn that he spun in which he "disintroduced" himself, the romance being told with so great fidelity to circumstance and so great verisimilitude that his hearers never doubted the actuality of the professed occurrence. As an example, I will relate one of these fictional incidents:

While at luncheon one day at Harvey's, in Washington, Bierce asked me where I had been the evening before, as he had not seen me. I replied that I had dined with Mr. Blank and his family. Now, Mr. Blank was the president of the principal street railway of Washington; his cars were usually overcrowded, and Bierce was seldom able to get a seat. He paid his nickel, however, and felt indignant every time he did so.

"Well," said Bierce, "I was introduced to your friend Blank not long ago, right in this place, where I was seated at that long table over there with eight or ten others. I immediately proceeded to disintroduce myself in language that should prove of great benefit to the patrons of Mr. Blank's

road. I refused to remain in the same room with the creature, and with solemn indignation took my departure."

That story Bierce told dozens of times to different persons. Nevertheless, it had not the slightest foundation in fact. Furthermore, Bierce dreaded a "scene." He never started one, except in print, and always was disgusted by any *outré* occurrence.

III

Commonly readers attribute to an author all the evil properties of his literary characters. If the character be a drunkard, so is the author; if brutal, the author is likewise. If the character believes in ghosts, necessarily the author does.

Bierce's reputation for brutality rests mainly on the acts of his characters. I safely affirm that he was seldom brutal in his personal contacts. He abhorred cruelty. Never effeminate, he was singularly compassionate, and resented a wanton injury, whether physical or mental—except the mental anguish inflicted by the pen on sinners.

Strong man though he was, every inch a man's man, more than once I have seen him weep. But only thrice: once when he told me of his young son, Day, killed in a duel over some wretched woman; and again, when he talked to me of his other son, Leigh, and his death, due to typhoid, in New York. John O'Hara Cosgrave was the next to bring tears from Bierce's eyes. He was describing to me, with a profound sense of gratitude, how Cosgrave had befriended him after the death of young Bierce in New York; how he had kept at the side of the bereaved father, unceasingly, trying to divert him from his grief.

However, Bierce was seldom given to a display of affection, although none could have known him well without being aware that he craved the love of his kind. Some hold that he loved his friends devotedly—while he loved them. To be sure, he succeeded in alienating them all (unless I except

dear old Mrs. McCrackin and myself) ; yet, in his way he loved them, I verily believe.

If his readers have appraised him in the same column with his unlovable characters, they have done so in disregard of the tenderness that he has shown in both prose and verse. That masterpiece entitled *A Baby Tramp* has been read quite as extensively as any of his other short stories. Nothing more pathetic, more heartrending, more exquisite in compassion has been done in American literature. Let *Nanine*, in verse, unveil the soul of the master who was not brutal:

NANINE

We heard a song-bird trilling—

'Twas but a day ago.

Such rapture he was rilling

As only we could know.

This morning he is flinging

His music from the tree,

But something in the singing

Is not the same to me.

His inspiration fails him,

Or he has lost his skill?

Nanine, Nanine, what ails him

That he should sing so ill?

Nanine is not replying—

She hears no earthly song.

The sun and bird are lying

And the night is, O, so long!

Then, too, Bierce's care of his pets, uncouth creatures as some of them were, shows his oneness with other than human life, even his pet frog sharing his comprehensive brotherhood, as witness these inspired lines:

. that looks with quiet eyes
Across the noise of days, to where the silence lies.

These are the only words of this short poem that I remember. Through some oversight on Bierce's part, perhaps, it

was not included in his *Collected Works*. The omission was hardly intentional, for of all the vast amount of verse that Bierce wrote, he never composed, to my way of thinking, more than a score of lines of real poetry, of which these are two.

Among his pets were snakes, lizards, turtles, squirrels, canaries and frogs. They seemed to understand that he was their protector and friend. At times there would be six or eight assorted creatures occupying his bedroom with him, and even the snakes—great big fellows, six-foot or more—would obey his commands, come slowly forward, eat out of his hand, and otherwise disport themselves in the most friendly way. His chief companions among pets were canaries and squirrels. Dogs and cats he never had about him. He pretended to dislike dogs. Having established a thesis against them many years ago, he never reversed himself, and when he died his only canine associates were men and women.

He could hate as well as love; but, unlike his love, he never dissembled his hate. No backhanded hater was he. He hated an offense, and he believed in punishing the offender; but he stooped to no low trick in meting out punishment. His enemy never had cause to fear a snake in the grass: Bierce always fought in the open, with clean hands, but clenched. He never slapped a man; he hit him.

IV

Of the Beatitudes, I doubt if Bierce approved a single one; not certainly "Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy." Yet at times, and quite infrequently, he would be merciful. Perhaps his usual inclination was to exercise mercy, but he was strongly of the opinion that force was the master of evil, that the greater good was effected by its invariable application, and that the practice of mercy, even in exceptional instances, was inevitably followed by some form of punishment visited upon the innocent, with an immoral reaction upon the public. When Bierce exercised

clemency toward offenders, his own laziness was the cause, not any spirit of forgiveness.

"Truth to say," he would affirm, "a condition known as forgiveness cannot exist. The word describes an impossibility. Certainly the mere utterance of the word cannot atone for a wrong, cannot undo an evil wrought, nor place the injured once again *in status quo*. The plea for forgiveness and the sense of contrition reveal merely the reaction of penitents that is common even in the depraved—based upon fear and the dread of consequent punishment—emotions that are in no wise exalted, but are reflexes of cringing cowards. Since conscience severely punishes the wrongdoer and inevitably flays every normal man; since none has attained spiritual heights where that sword of Damocles can be reached and cut down; since it is the dread of the purest in heart and the scourge of the vicious, the chief punishment on earth, meted out by the followers of Jehovah, good and bad alike have welcomed Forgiveness as an easy way to escape the punishment of Conscience. To forgive, then, is not divine; to seek forgiveness is distinctly contemptible, cowardly; to accept forgiveness as a propitiation of wrong is, to the good and to the bad among men, the desert-sands into which the craven thrusts the head of Conscience. Certainly no emotion, no matter what its origin, can remit any sin, can restore any part of any structure that has been razed, can blot out a single tear."

The futility of "forgiveness" Bierce one pointed out to me in this anecdote:

An Irishman was boasting to an Englishman of his travels and of the wonders he had seen. His hearer listened with great self-control until the Hibernian said:

"Why, bedad, Oi've seen anchovies growin' on trees in Africa."

"If you say that, you're a blasted liar," was the Englishman's quiet comment.

"A loiar am I, is it? An' it's powder yo'll have to burn wid me!"

The duel was fought. The Englishman lay on the field of honor *in extremis*. Suddenly, with a look of enlightenment on his countenance, Pat ran to the dying man's side and cried out repentently:

"Howly Virgin! Indade Oi'm sorry, me friend! Forgive me! I clean disremembered: Oi knew 'twas somethin' Oi'd see in bottles that grew in Africa; an' Oi jist recall—'twas capers Oi saw on the trees down there! An' Oi'm sorry Oi've kilt ye! Forgive me!"

Faith, Hope, and Charity were all well enough, perhaps, as precepts—but unworkable. As to humanity: Bierce claimed to have no faith in it, no hope for it, and (least of all) declared he felt no charity toward it. In the abstract, however, each of the three "cardinal virtues" was a laudable emotion, and the lip-service rendered to it was not particularly offensive. Man's devotion to abstractions perhaps did hoist him a bit with his own petard.

Doubtless it would be too much to say (I do not) that Bierce was without any sense of the brotherhood of man; but it does seem to me that he was lacking in Charity. No breadth of sympathy for immoral mortals was his—not, at least, for immoral normal male adults. For the physically afflicted, man and beast; for women, hardly to be counted human; and for children, manifestly irresponsible, his sympathy was real and boundless. I do not mean to say that he was altogether selfish; that he was without charity because it would entail some form of sacrifice on his part; that he would not share his possessions with others; that he would stand coldly by and witness distress that was within his power to alleviate. In much he was generous enough, giving beyond his means, pecuniarily and by service; but Charity in its broadest sense was a property he did not possess. It was not his to give. We might even say that he might truly be counted among the uncharitable.

Gratitude he probably held to be the cardinal virtue. Ingratitude, conversely, was the most despicable of traits. To perform a service in the expectation of receiving gratitude as a reward, was contemptible—and, thank heaven! the reward was seldom forthcoming. On the other hand, he who was not thankful, and who did not show gratitude to his benefactor, was unpardonably low—pointing Bierce's contention that humanity was hopeless, since he believed but few persons to be endowed with any sense of gratitude, even among those few who mumbled some words expressive of an unexperienced emotion.

Since he held these views, we might expect to find the spirit of gratitude deeply rooted in him. Not so. I have referred to his speaking of the gratitude he felt toward Cosgrave for the sympathy that that friend of his had extended at the time of young Leigh Bierce's death. Perhaps he did feel as he said. If so, it is the only instance within my knowledge in which he seemed to feel or to express any recognition of benefits he had received, although the persons to whom he should have been grateful were numerous. I should say that he was a distinctly ungrateful being. As I write these words I can hear him turning over in his grave, waking up long enough to denounce me, his surprise and shock being very real.

He would often explain that Hearst was a generous but not a just man, referring in part to Hearst's pecuniary acts but more largely to his general outlook. I could not but think that this characterization applied with equal force to Bierce himself. In fact, many of the defects in others that he most condemned were very largely those that found lodgment in himself. I do not refer to faults of an infamous nature, counted criminal, but to others that are so common to otherwise decent humanity. By way of example, I will point to one or two: Bierce roundly denounced petty affections, pre-

tenses, posing—all well-massed in his own personality. Again: he exercised the right to flay the pretender, to debunk the bunker; yet he would spring aflame in burning wrath when the slightest taper was applied to himself. He denied to every living man other than himself (not to the dead) the right to chastise. He alone among the living was permitted to wield the knout. The lash of vituperation when applied to his own naked soul showed the wielder to be beneath the contempt of the Devil, a puerile creature, “with the nature of an uncracked louse and the physical methods of a skunk,” as he himself put it.

Vindictive? Yes; but seldom was his vindictiveness translated into action, if ever—except on paper. In speaking out, or flaying with his pen, he showed that he was no coward. That he did not wreak vengeance in other ways was due to his innate nobility; for, with all his faults, none was heinous, and Bierce was essentially a noble man. He was incapable of any premeditated act of meanness.

V

Despite his hatred of pretenders and the withering scorn with which he blighted them, it would be too much to classify Bierce as a Reformer—in the offensive sense that that term has now acquired.

“All normal men,” he would say, “and perhaps a modicum of women, develop the disease Reformitis, following closely the maladies of their earlier youth, such as measles, whooping-cough, and chicken-pox. Youth sees the nasty world stretched out before him. He can go far in no direction without stepping into a cesspool. To him it is astounding that his predecessors had not cleaned it up—a very simple task and one of rapid achievement, in his estimation. The disease is a persistent one, intensely painful, and very distressing to all beholders not likewise afflicted. However, it passes with the onset of mental maturity, while continuing throughout life

with those hapless persons who never grow up. In old age the chief joy of life is the happiness one derives from the sense that he has been thoroughly cured of the scourge Reformitis, and then he proceeds to take joy in observing the antics of those whom he used to condemn, making merry at their gambols. The 'sins' of this world are the source of man's chief pleasure. Let us pray for more sin."

And that really was the attitude of Bierce grown old. The "cry-baby" communists and anarchists really railed against the trivialities of life that are finally to become, when the "cry-babies" have reformed themselves, their keenest delight. I think the great satirist finally came to the conclusion, although he would have been the last to admit it, that he himself had wasted a good deal of dynamite in blasting pebbles.

Reformitis does not seem to have followed measles with Bierce. Certainly his immunity was not due to warfare; so if we discard his theory of the cause of the malady, possibly we may attribute his power of resistance to inheritance from his New England ancestors. Having this in mind, I asked him one day if he had ever thought of putting on the cloth, remarking at the time that it seemed to me he would have made a good parson. He did not have to beg the question, since no such thought had ever occurred to him; he did beg it, nevertheless, saying that he would have made a highly effective evangelist, since he would have brought brains as well as passion to the ecclesiastical stump or wagon-tail.

"But, here's the rub: to be an evangelist of the highest order, one must have brains; and one having brains could never be an evangelist. In all churches, whatever the communion, thus it is: the brainless preach to the brainless; every clergyman bears upon his brow the stamp of the cloven hoof: *Ignorance*."

Whatever the impulse that urged Bierce to attack sinners,

and particularly the type of transgressors who operated in shams—every mother's son of us being a transgressor in this particular—whatever the urge, it was not the religious enthusiasm and the emotional distortions of adolescence.

I shall mention elsewhere in this volume, if I remember to do so, that Bierce held all poets to be either socialists or communists, and frequently both. Nor did he blame them. He thought that their abhorrence of injustice as wreaked upon the poor (poor for the reason that they were mentally but slightly evolved beyond mollusks) was woven into their tissues, coursed through their blood, and animated their every cell. Yet he thoroughly despised those "cry-babies," as he termed them.

It is interesting to note that Bierce himself in his youth barely escaped a place in the same classification (due to his flaying of wealthy sinners) to which he later assigned socialists, anarchists, communists, and others lacking balance in their Utopian aspirations. He was no communist, however, and early in life conceded the superiority of the capitalistic order of society to any other economic scheme so far conceived. Take from man incentive, founded upon his selfish desire for some form of personal aggrandizement, and achievement would cease; the retrogression of man would be inevitable.

"Yes," he would say of the communist "cry-babies," "they don't seem to see the innards of the acrobatic human insects, rather neatly put by Swift:

"So, naturalists observe, a flea
Has smaller flees that on his prey;
And these have smaller still to bite 'em;
And so proceed *ad infinitum*."

I reaffirm that Bierce was without "temperament" in the *cantatrice* sense.

CHAPTER V

BIERCE THE SOLDIER

I

AMBROSE BIERCE was among the first to go to the defense of the Union in the War of the States. He enlisted as a private, in Company C, Ninth Regiment, Indiana Volunteer Infantry, and while in active service was promoted until he reached the rank of captain. Later he was made a major by brevet, "for heroic and meritorious service." Many accounts of his bravery have been published (never from information supplied by him). He seems to have been absolutely fearless, utterly reckless of his life, and, consequently, was several times wounded—dangerously so twice. The war ended, his military career had been without blemish. Nor has his bitterest enemy challenged at any point his record as a soldier. Here he was invulnerable to attack.

As in the case of many another, the Civil War made a man of Bierce, and laid the foundation of his literary achievements, influencing his life at every turn, but particularly his work in literature.

Strange, but the World War so far has failed to produce a scrap of literature worthy the name; yet there were something like fifty men engaged in that conflict to one in the American civil strife, and in the former the cultural proportions were as a thousand to one. The World War seems to have been the only conflict of large proportions entirely unproductive of a literary masterpiece. Perhaps the participants were too blinded by blood to see the glory of the coming of

the Lord, or the charge of the Light Brigade, or the antics of Fuzzy-Wuzzy.

No subject was of greater interest to Bierce throughout his adult life than was warfare. Here again his interests and mine converged, for no other subject has so greatly interested me. For more than forty years he gave it frequent study, almost daily, and at the time I write its study has been an avocation with me for more than thirty years. We have both mingled with students of the science and the art of war—with army and navy officers, military and naval writers—and for four years Bierce participated in as hard fighting as the world has ever seen. As a publisher I have read hundreds of manuscripts treating of different aspects of different wars that have been published under my direction and hundreds of others that have never been printed, and, besides, have read many other military works. Particularly, Bierce had read pretty much everything worth while that had been issued treating of the major wars as fought throughout recorded history. Even so, a building as large as the Pantheon would not be necessary to house these books.

Again, our conclusions, independently reached, did not often diverge. When they did, neither undertook to convince the other. To us both the Civil War was the most interesting of all conflicts, and even the World War, which began shortly after Bierce's death, holds no such interest for me as does the great American internecine struggle. Even more than the Trojan War, if that be possible, the Civil War was one of romance. No other conflict at arms developed greater difficulties; none other was conducted with comparable humanity; none other with greater chivalry. Here military art and science developed the highest technique, if grand strategy be excepted. Here was typical as well as ideal warfare. Both sides fought for high ideals, fought for them with humanity, and nearly always in accordance with the rules of civilized

military procedure. Here (on both sides) were made all the blunders known to warfare, from the dawn of tribal strife to the present moment.

Bierce, I affirm, was a deep student of war; and I hold that he was a great strategist. I make no such claims for myself: I am merely a lay student. He was thirty years my senior; his military service extended through four years, and his position as a staff officer during much of that time brought him into close personal contact with the military chieftains of the Western armies. Undoubtedly, I had knowledge of the Southern armies that he did not possess at the time we first met, and he often said that I supplied him with a great deal of information with respect to the Southern forces, military and naval, and with regard to political and social conditions, which I had gathered from many sources.

The Southern soldier knew his South far better than the Northern knew his North; knew it better topographically, politically, and socially. The Southern officer could visualize the South as a whole; the Northern officer, with but few exceptions, was parochial, and not even well versed in the history of his particular parish. Northern officers from New England, parts of New York, Eastern Pennsylvania, and all New Jersey may be excepted. I refer, of course, to officers both Southern and Northern who were without military training prior to the war.

Bierce would say, while commenting on information that I would supply to him, that the hundreds of Neale Civil War books had done much to clarify the atmosphere, and that if it had not been for these publications the South's contentions, its political views, the achievements of its military and naval leaders, would soon have become largely traditional, and would have had but a small part in recorded history. The genesis of the Civil War, he did me the honor to say, was for the first time set forth in print in my book entitled *The*

Sovereignty of the States. As a matter of fact, only in recent years have my views therein expressed—and there expressed in print for the first time by anybody—been taught in our leading colleges.

Thus, for many years, we frequently discussed warfare and the new books on the subject as they would appear, seldom discussing them with combativeness, and nearly always with a convergence of opinions.

Many would like to know Bierce's view on all military and naval matters that we talked over; but it would take several volumes to contain all. However, this biography would be sadly deficient if I were to omit altogether, on account of lack of space, at least a few of his comments of unusual military value, although controversial.

Before proceeding to put some of his views before my readers, I will explain why, in my opinion, Bierce limited what he wrote of warfare to fiction. He would have made a great writer on both strategy and tactics; his military works would have been great military critiques; they probably would have become text-books on the science and the art of war that would have been taught in every military and naval school in the world. Here is my explanation:

II

Already (in the chapter entitled *Background* and elsewhere) I have commented at some length on Bierce inferiority complex, his false sense of cultural deficiency, felt principally when he was in the presence of men possessed of college diplomas. To be sure, many of these men were cursed with pigmy minds when they were awarded the diplomas. They were among the few persons who knew the only worth of the parchment scroll. But the vast multitude that never walked across a college campus held the diploma in reverence in his time. As a pupil Bierce had never been inside any educational edifice more imposing than a little red district

schoolhouse; but the man of pigmy mind, clutching in his hand his certificate of phantom knowledge, his poor little A.B., his only means of defense, would overthrow temporarily the stalwart mentality and organized intellect of Ambrose Bierce. He would sweat at the very thought of encountering the mature man ten years out of college, the man to whom he would have administered a vigorous kick when, as a youth, that creature had burst from the campus, yelping like a jackal, and waving his certificate of ignorance with boisterous enthusiasm. In four years the adolescent male had probably been in attendance at classes half that time, the rest being given to holidays and vacations, and had acquired some smattering of a few of many books, and some little information about some few subjects; but O that college diploma when waved in the face of the man who had never been to college!

So it was that Bierce feared the West Pointer. To me it was a mystery, the reason why he frequented the Army and Navy Club in Washington, of which he was a member. Always while there his inferiority complex was uppermost. Indeed, I wonder how any officer not a West Pointer, or an Annapolis man, could ever become a member of any American army and navy club, where all officers who have not been graduated from either the Military Academy or the Naval Academy are treated as intruders, rank outsiders; snobbishly treated, superciliously, and with ill-concealed contempt. To cite an instance:

While I was at the Army and Navy Club in Washington one evening, with several officers about, Bierce said that he thought oral commands in the field should be given slowly, in rolling tones, as carrying several times farther than sharp and crisp orders. An officer sneeringly commented (with intentional superciliousness) that the command crisp and sharp was the only kind that could be given when the other

fellow was shooting at you. Bierce subsided. Usually quick at a written reply to adverse criticism of himself, he was always amenable to oral ridicule, and seldom retorted, or defended himself in any way. It was the manner of the officer that had been offensive; and the manner would have been different had Bierce been a West Pointer.

III

Let us take a glance at the creature West Pointer whom Bierce so feared and revered. His twin brother at Annapolis differs from him not at all. At the age of eighteen, or thereabout, he has been selected by politicians for appointment to the Academy as a student. Before he is admitted he is required to pass a rigid physical examination, but is accepted with educational qualifications far below those exacted by Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Yale, and other leading colleges. Ofttimes he is a country youth, a farmer's lad, and is appointed by a member of Congress who is not infrequently district-school bred. Consequently, the mental examinations must not be too difficult for the district-schoolboy to pass. Readin' and writin' and 'rithmetic; geography, a smattering of solid geometry—and there you are! No language, beyond the first steps in his own, is required; no Latin, no Greek; no French, German, nor other modern language; nothing beyond proficiency in the subjects taught by elementary schools. Not one in ten of the boys who are admitted to West Point and to Annapolis could pass the mental examinations of any first-class American college.

Then, after admittance to the Military Academy, or to the Naval, these adolescents receive instruction in the academic courses from men of mediocrity, largely drawn from civil life, few of whom could long hold a position in any college of high standing. Not one teacher in a single academic course has been widely noted for scholarship. Some of the academic text-books are woefully deficient. Some (at

least, until recently) were in use one hundred years or more ago. If my memory serves me right, until a short time since Abercrombie's English Grammar, first published about one hundred and fifty years ago, was taught; and Abercrombie, even in his own time, was the butt of scholars. Many of the cultural courses made mandatory in our leading colleges are not taught at either West Point or Annapolis at all.

Furthermore, these boys lead a cloistered life, almost monkish in its seclusion, and have but little contact with the world at large. Petticoats they encounter upon festive occasions, which are infrequent enough; but even so the lads are under the eyes of their masters and treated as if they were children. Graduated, they not infrequently marry some plug-ugly among the "antiques" that hang around the service Academies, the boys not having had the opportunity of meeting girls on a footing of equality, and being as ignorant of the female of the species as they are of the rest of the world. The West Pointers, never having had the opportunity of mingling with other men in the hurly-burly of life, leave West Point, ignorant of much of the general knowledge that is common to even young men on the farm, or in Main Street, and are sent out to army posts, where they have but little opportunity to acquire general information and to become familiar with civilian life through contact. Annapolis boys, upon being graduated, are sent on long cruises, extending over three years, or longer; then, after brief vacations, are frequently ordered out on other long cruises. Necessarily, most of their active service is passed at sea, where their only companions are officers like themselves, and as ignorant as themselves of the world and its affairs.

It seems to me elementary that fitness for high command requires more than a technical knowledge of warfare. Supreme fitness is acquired only by a breadth of knowledge that comprehends many branches of industry: economics,

commerce, agriculture as a science; and these are but a few of the many branches of knowledge in which military and naval officers in supreme command should have at least general information. A perfect commander would know all things. At West Point and at Annapolis but little of value is taught beyond the science and the art of warfare.

Nor do first-class military and naval men teach at the Academies—not while they are counted great, at any rate. Before the World War began, many of the instructors at the service schools had never been under fire. They had a theoretical knowledge of war only, supplemented by instruction in strategy and in tactics—if strategy, indeed, can be taught; it cannot be.

It is folly to presume that military and naval schools can take raw material, adolescents, and in four years make of these boys proficient commanders of armies and navies. Their knowledge of warfare is acquired after they leave school—the greater part of the knowledge they ever acquire—and this is necessarily so.

Now let us consider the products of West Point and of Annapolis. No great military commander has been born on this continent—none of first rank, none of even secondary rank. But there was one military genius of the North American continent, an aborigine, an Indian warrior: Chief Joseph of the Nez Percés nation. Another military genius, a lowly negro, was a Haitian, Toussaint-Louverture. Both fairly won the high regard in which they are held as generals. I make no invidious comparisons; I intend none; but Washington, Chief Joseph, Toussaint-Louverture, Robert E. Lee, “Stonewall” Jackson, Thomas, Sherman, Grant, Pershing, never proved themselves to be military commanders comparable in ability to men of really first rank, such as Alexander, Scipio Africanus, Caesar, Wallenstein, Napoleon—nor even Frederick, for that matter. West Point has pro-

duced no general of the first order of ability; Annapolis, no admiral.

West Pointers have claimed that the ablest military officers of both the Union and the Confederacy were trained at West Point. But neither army developed a first-rate genius, nor any leader better than a second-rate commander, and the man who brought the war to a successful termination for the United States was among the lowest in his class at West Point. Yet, his was the mind that invented the strategy by which converging armies forced the surrender of Lee and of Johnston. That strategy was not taught to him at West Point. It was of Grant himself. Maréchal Foch made use of Grant's strategy in bringing the World War to a successful termination for the armies under his command.

Among the more accomplished military men of the white race born on this continent was the late Nelson A. Miles, who was no West Pointer, and he had as his peers a number of men who never went to the Military Academy; and many have held—although I never have—that Forrest was the military genius of the Civil War. He was no West Pointer, but a trader in negro slaves, illiterate, and unable to utter a grammatical sentence. Instances might be multiplied to show that a West Point training is not essential to military efficiency. Who is there to say that Lee, Grant, "Stonewall" Jackson, and many other West Pointers, would not have been as capable generals if their military training had been no more extensive than that of Chief Joseph, Toussaint-Louverture, Forrest, and Miles? That is not to say that military experience is not essential to competent generalship; but it is to say that military training can be obtained apart from a four-year course at a military school, where there is no contact with actual warfare, and where the student body is largely comprised of adolescents—youths in every way inexperienced, with undeveloped minds, incapable of mature

reflection and a thorough understanding of such principles of the science and the art of war as their instructors try to impart to them. But—to hear the converse of West Pointers, you would think that Alexander, Caesar, and Bonaparte were but feeble leaders; for none of those warriors had the distinction of being graduated from the Military Academy of our “great and glorious country.” Our naval heroes are not Annapolis men, with a few exceptions, but men who were taught the science and the art of naval warfare by experience at sea. The naval hero of the Civil War was Farragut.

IV

Bierce contended that the disparity in population and resources of the South as compared to those of the North at the time the Civil War began was not so great as to render impossible, or even improbable, the success of the Southern arms. Natural resources — minerals, fertile agricultural lands, and all the other raw sinews of war—were in the possession of the Southerners. Their farms were in a high state of cultivation, with an abundance of skilled labor available with which to till them—farms capable of sustaining indefinitely a population vastly greater than that of the South. The negro population was highly trained in manual pursuits—particularly in agriculture, but also to a considerable extent in mining—and there was ample trained labor for the production of ordnance and other essential military equipment. The population of the two sections was approximately one to three, comprising a numerical equality, since the invader should have three men under arms to one of the invaded. The defensive had the advantage of a superior knowledge of terrain and a sympathetic population, and required but few troops to guard interior military posts and lines of communication, and had the advantage, too, of in-

terior lines, with the ability to move troops rapidly from point to point, concentrating forces at a given place before the enemy possibly could do so.

"To hear Southerners talk," Bierce would say, "one would suppose that the entire South had been overrun by Federal troops. Such was not the case. But relatively little of the area of the South was ever occupied by Union soldiers until near the conclusion of the war. Old men, boys, negroes, and women were at liberty to supply the armies at the front with all the food and equipment necessary to success. So the Southerners thought at the time the war began, and two years, even three years, later. After the war they thought (or talked) differently. But they had been right at first. They simply failed to make the most of their opportunities.

"Where were the railways laid down that would connect the Southern, Eastern, and Western armies of the Confederacy? Were the Southern military commanders so stupid as to believe that the war would be won for them before railways could be constructed? Did they think they could bring the war to a successful conclusion without the use of natural resources, without taking full advantage of their military opportunities, without availing themselves, to the fullest extent, of their interior lines? What preparation did they make for mining? What plants did they build for the production of munitions and ordnance? What attempt did they make even to conserve and keep in repair their existing railways, manufacturing plants, and other means of supply already developed? There was no shortage of labor. Nor was there a shortage of fighting men, if all capable of bearing arms had been forced into military service; and, as in the case of nearly all wars, more boys grew into manhood during the course of the war than there were soldiers either killed or wounded in battle.

“Did President Davis think, did General Lee believe, that successful warfare in modern times depended only upon the armies in the field?—or that a war waged against the United States could be determined by a single battle, or by a series of battles, or even by the destruction of whole armies, while a single army remained? Apparently so! At any rate, no intelligent effort was made to keep intact and efficient the organized South, which was sufficiently well organized at the time the conflict began to conduct a war of major proportions, and absolutely no effort was made to develop the vast resources of the South that were then lying in waste.

“The logical city for the capital of the Confederacy was Atlanta—not Richmond, but Atlanta, six hundred miles from Washington; Atlanta, in the centre of the South, readily accessible to all parts of the South, and to the sea, to the Gulf, to the Mississippi, and last but not least, accessible to Mexico, with its great natural resources, a neutral country, which could have supplied the South with limitless agricultural and mineral products and with arms and ammunition, without violation of neutrality, and even with men. The battlefield, to be sure, should have continued to be Virginia, and there, and in the fastnesses of the rest of the South, the Southern armies, in defensive warfare, could have held out against the enemy forever.

“The invasion of Maryland and Pennsylvania and the attempt to capture Washington were crude military blunders. The north was overrun with Southern sympathizers and others who believed that ‘the erring sisters’ should be permitted to depart in peace. Why alienate this host? Instead, why not continue to thunder out in the North the theory of State Rights, State Sovereignty—in which all the States believed, with the only proviso of the greater number that the Union should not be dissolved. No, the South-

ern high command should have fought a defensive war, under duress, on Virginian soil, or other Southern soil, from the time of invasion and should have defended that soil by proper use of its great military advantage of interior lines.

"Hindsight? Not at all! But if it were, a great military commander must be possessed of every sort of vision, hindsight as well as foresight. He does not measure up to first-class generalship when he fails to see his opportunities and when he fails to make the most of them.

"Suppose that the head of a great business failed to superintend its every department, or to concentrate his knowledge of the business as a whole upon its weakest points; he would soon fail, and bankruptcy would be his punishment. So with any supreme military command: the commander-in-chief must be the whole works; he must not leave to others the task of supplying the means with which to wage war. He may delegate, as he must, immediate supervision to subordinates, but his must be the genius directing every inferior, weeding out the incompetents, laying down general rules to guide efficient and inefficient alike. His is a pitiful plea in avoidance when he says that he lacks resources and men. It is his business to see to it that both are provided.

"Since the invader should have three soldiers to one of the invaded, and all other resources in proportion, Lee made the cardinal mistake of invading the North when he was the weaker of the contending forces in the military proportion of one to nine. It would be hard to imagine any military or political situation that would have rendered the invasion justifiable. Certainly there was no such political condition at home; nor in Europe, since temporary successes of the invaders would hardly have brought about recognition by Great Britain, or aid from any other part of Europe. The invasion must be counted as an unpardonable blunder on the part of the Confederate high command.

"After all, was not Lee as a soldier a mere opportunist, and did that not account for the invasion of Maryland and Pennsylvania?" asked Bierce. "There was the opportunity, or the possibility, even the probability, of administering a signal though temporary defeat to the Union army; but not its destruction. The threats against Philadelphia and Washington were more fanciful than real; nor would the war have been won if both Philadelphia and Washington had been taken: whole armies—all armies—not a single army, not a few cities, not a capital, must be destroyed in modern warfare before a war can be brought to a successful termination. Hence, the question may well be asked, if Lee were not an opportunist, fighting without grand strategy?—without any general plan, as, for example, a plan by which the war could be extended indefinitely until the enemy should be worn out; not exhausted, but become tired of war?"

"The apparent failure of the Confederate high command early to realize the importance of the Western field of war was another cardinal blunder. Always Richmond!—the belief that the fall of Richmond would result in the fall of the Confederacy—as if the capital of a new nation were of great consequence, even in the light of public opinion at home and abroad! With Richmond and not Atlanta as the seat of Government, the capital should have been mobile, even 'in the saddle,' if necessary. [Bierce could not look forward to see how little was the effect upon public opinion when the French proceeded to abandon their ancient capital during the World War and remove the Government to Bordeaux.] There should have been rapid movements of Confederate troops between the East and the West along interior lines, as occasion required, without undue thought of Richmond. Lines of communication were relatively easy to maintain.

"The time came (but should never have come) when the

Confederates could not effect a convergence of the Eastern and the Western armies."

V

As to the relative abilities of Grant and Lee, Bierce held Lee to be by far the greater commander in the field, with Grant the greater strategist. Grant had a plan, a great plan, to wage war successfully; Lee had none. Grant put his plan into successful operation; Lee went down to defeat.

"At the time of Lee's orderly retreat from Gettysburg, he was in command of as fine an army as the world had ever known; and it was well-equipped. Even then the South was in a position to wage a successful war; Gettysburg had decided nothing; the morale of the South had not been affected. In fact, the South did not admit defeat in that battle, nor does to this day. The Union army was quite as good as the Confederate, as well equipped, even better equipped; but there was no great numerical disparity between the two, nor any other disparity, the relative positions of invader and invaded being taken into account. The West was in bad shape, to be sure, but in no hopeless condition. The fact that the South held out nearly two years after Gettysburg shows that she was in no desperate plight at the time Lee had successfully withdrawn his army from the North. Grant became the South's principal liability.

"We should remember, too, in attempting to appraise Lee's ability, that he was never pitted in battle against his equal in generalship, much less his superior. In fighting Grant, for example, he was infinitely superior to his enemy in planning and conducting a battle. Lee, the opportunist, could fight his army with rare skill, take advantage of the errors of his inferior opponents among generals, and in the conduct of a battle—or even a campaign—he seldom erred. But at times he did err, grievously, making fundamental

mistakes; not mistakes resulting from unlooked-for eventualities such as are common to all campaigns and battles, known as 'the accidents of war'; his most censurable errors were in his deliberated plans.

"In adversely criticising the failure of the Confederate high command to make use of all its resources, we may not say that Grant if in command of all the armies of the South would have provided men, munitions, food, clothing, and all the other necessities of successful warfare. He was never tested. The North was so organized and her resources so administered that it was unnecessary for Grant to concern himself with anything other than strategy and the fighting of his armies. We may assume, however, that his generalship would have been so comprehensive as to embrace the raising and the equipping of necessary forces, with ample fuel for his great machines.

"Jefferson Davis was the most competent of all Southerners to head the Confederate Government. Forsooth, there was no other man! It is a question if he would not have been a greater commander than Lee in the field. With long and ample military training, with hard and brilliant fighting to his credit, with a wide knowledge of men and their motives, an experienced and a great statesman, the greatest of the secretaries of war that the United States could claim up to the time that he left office, he was incomparably better equipped than any other Southerner to fill the office of President and that of Commander-in-Chief of the Confederate armies and navies. His ability in selecting commanders was so acute as to be weird. If, instead of Lincoln, he had been President of the United States, the probability is that the war would have been brought to an early termination. On the other hand, it might not have been, since it has been pretty thoroughly demonstrated that

generalship in the field is but one of the many qualities necessary to successful modern warfare."

As to Bierce's estimate of Lincoln, he would say that it seemed strange, passing strange, that the supporters of the Union should have elected to the Presidency a man untrained as a soldier, with but little military experience, but meagrely educated, and with but slight contact with the great men of his time; a small-town man, a failure in everything he had undertaken until he was past middle age, unfamiliar with international affairs, untried in world-diplomacy, unacquainted with European politics, and with little knowledge of the extent of the resources of either the North or the South. Yet, he proved to be the right man for the place—toward the end of the war. Genius that he was, his foresight was so inclusive as to embrace many of the qualities necessary to the defense of the Union, but not the knowledge of how to select competent generals. Here he lacked inherent capacity; nor did he seem to know how a war should be waged; he had no war instinct. Lincoln, said Bierce, helped to sustain his thesis—that successful wars were not fought on battlefields alone.

"Davis and Lee, then, had to contend with the high hosts of Heaven; with one great genius, Lincoln, and with one great strategist, Grant, both God-made. Neither Davis nor Lee was a genius. Talent they both had; both had minds far better informed in the things that men can learn than had either Lincoln or Grant; technically they were in every respect better equipped; but both lacked the qualities that only the gods possess: knowledge without learning; and in those essentials of successful warfare Lincoln and Grant excelled Davis and Lee.

"Again," said Bierce, "let us visualize Lincoln as the President of the Confederacy and Grant as the active commander of the Southern armies: Would the South have won

the war? Perhaps! It would not have been impossible, nor improbable, particularly as the Fates had given the greater military leaders to the South."

If in this chapter I would seem to have directed Bierce's adverse criticism principally to the Confederates, this was because the mistakes of the Northern armies were so great, so numerous, so stupid, the generals so incompetent, that a restatement of his condemnation would be unprintable.

CHAPTER VI

HIS RELATIONS WITH HEARST

I

THE Civil War ended, Bierce was offered a commission in the regular army, unsought by him when thousands were moving Heaven and Hell to get one. But literature as well as the Army was a lure; so he decided to flip a coin, his career to be decided by a single toss. Literature came up. Whether literature was heads or tails, I neglected to ask.

He had observed that, contrary to the movement of the planets, humanity took a westward course. He attributed this to the glory of the sunsets and to the mystery they held, beckoning to youth, as it were. I suggested there was no difference between sunrise and sunset, one being as gorgeous and as mysterious as the other. "To be sure," he agreed; "but one is not up in time to see the sun rise. At any rate, man travels westward when he changes his habitat, and if he finally reaches the Orient, it is because he has kept on traveling." So westward he went, to California, to take up literature as a vocation.

Frequently he would speculate as to whether the coin had played him false:

"I would have been a major-general long ago, now retired, with an excellent income. . . I might have written during my military career, too But not as I would have liked I can hardly visualize a successful combination of the two vocations And I could have been Ambrose Bierce in neither, but Uncle Sam's man—which means everybody's man My independence is my

wealth; it is my literature. I have written to please myself, no matter who should be hurt, and very little that I have written could have been published if I had remained in the army The coin was all right: it played fair."

II

Upon his return from London, in the '70s, Bierce took up his residence in California, and in San Francisco turned to journalism as a vocation. The fame he had acquired abroad had preceded him, and he looked forward to a substantial success in the higher fields of literature as well as in journalism, and to a pecuniary success in addition to an increase in fame. But the mountains of granite known as the Great Divide were not to be scaled by any Pacific Coast writer. Bret Harte had attempted the feat, and so had Joaquin Miller and a few others; but even to this day, dead, their fame is still, for the greater part, on the other side of the mountains.

The dwellers along the Atlantic seaboard treated the authors of the Pacific Coast with indifference when they did not deride them for their "pretenses," and we of the East still turn up our noses at the peculiar types of culture that exist west of the Appalachian range; for we seem to hold that one does not have to go even so far as Pittsburgh to find a barbarism quite unknown to Boston and to New York. In the early days of Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Joaquin Miller, and Ambrose Bierce, the anemic writers dwelling in that narrow strip known as the Atlantic seaboard were quite certain that they alone were producing literature worthy of attention, and their equally anemic readers, agreeing with them, affirmed that no other literature worth while could be found outside of Europe. As a publisher I am fully aware that there still exists some prejudice in the East against Western writers, and against all culture west of the Appa-

lachians; but that prejudice is to be found along the Atlantic seaboard only, not in Europe, and I may add that there never was a time when European authors and readers held the Pacific Coast writers in disesteem. The literary lions of London were Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Joaquin Miller, Ambrose Bierce, and a number of others, and not one that I can recall, except Lowell, hailed from the Atlantic seaboard.

Bierce, then, had a hard struggle pecuniarily; and, while he soon established his fame as a great writer all along the Pacific Coast, and extended his European renown, his name was virtually unknown east of the Rockies, and to this day is seldom heard in literary circles in the Eastern cities. He is better known, both the man and his work, in some of the hamlets of Scandinavia, Germany, Belgium, France, England, and Italy than he is in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

There were times, through long stretches, when he earned by his pen not more than ten dollars a week; so he had to turn to other employment, and accepted a position as assayer in the service of the United States Government, at the Mint. During these early days he was editor of the *Argonaut* and other Coast periodicals, always contributing to those magazines literature of the first order—and receiving but little pay. *Enter*: William Randolph Hearst. Let Bierce describe the first scene:¹

Many years ago I lived in Oakland, California. One day as I lounged in my lodging there was a gentle, hesitating rap at the door and, opening it, I found a young man, the youngest young man, it seemed to me, that I had ever confronted. His appearance, his attitude, his manner, his entire personality suggested extreme diffidence. I did not ask him in, instate him in my better chair (I had two) and inquire

¹*A Thumb-Nail Sketch*, in *The Collected Works*, Vol. XII, beginning at p. 305.

how we could serve each other. If my memory is not at fault, I merely said: "Well," and awaited the result.

"I am from the San Francisco *Examiner*," he explained in a voice like the fragrance of violets made audible, and backed a little away.

"O," I said, "you come from Mr. Hearst."

Then that unearthly child lifted its blue eyes and cooed:

"I am Mr. Hearst."

His father had given him a daily newspaper and he had come to hire me to write for it. Twenty years of what his newspapers call "wage slavery" ensued, and although I had many a fight with his editors for my right to my self-respect, I cannot say that I ever found Mr. Hearst's chain a very heavy burden, though indubitably I suffered somewhat in social repute for wearing it.

III

Bierce early recognized in Hearst a high order of journalistic ability, and one day remarked to me that the time would come when that newspaperman would be imitated by even the most scrupulous of his pharisaic traducers. While Bierce abhorred socialism and mass opinions, ridiculing the title by brevet "Thinkerissimo" that Hearst conferred upon the Great Unwashed, the man's sheer audacity, bravery, and utter disregard of abusiveness won our famous author's admiration. From the time that the San Francisco *Examiner* "was handed to the youthful Willie on a silver salver as a plaything by his papa," he was esteemed by Bierce as a master of commercial journalism, creative, and as being seldom pecuniarily unsuccessful even in minor details, while always hugely successful in obtaining his pecuniary objective.

"Why," Bierce would say, "Hearst has a greater grasp of the details of his enterprises than any other newspaperman has of his. His six-foot-type headlines are set by himself; all his *outré* typographical arrangements are of his own invention, and there is nothing about a newspaper that he does not know. From writing a leader—the best that can be

written from his point of view—to putting it into type, he is a master, and what he writes will be reprinted as a first-page news item throughout the country.”

As to the charge made against Hearst from time to time, that he would require his writers to engage in his propaganda, however great the violence to their convictions and the insult to their intelligence, Bierce did not believe it. Beyond guidance in his general policies—such guidance as is common to all successful enterprises—Bierce believed that Hearst gave to his writers a free hand. To be sure, he may have selected men holding his own views; but what of it?—he would be a fool to do otherwise. Men usually surround themselves in their enterprises with persons in sympathy with their aims. The usual Republican President of the United States does not select a cabinet of Democrats. So far as Bierce was concerned, he had this to say as to any attempt at coercion on the part of Hearst, relating it in *A Thumb-Nail Sketch*:

He did not once direct nor request me to write an opinion that I did not hold, and only two or three times suggested that I refrain for a season from expressing opinions that I did hold, when they were antagonistic to the policy of the paper, as they commonly were. During several weeks of a great labor strike in California, when mobs of ruffians stopped all railway trains, held the state capital and burned, plundered and murdered at will, he “laid me off,” continuing, of course, my salary; and some years later, when striking employees of street railways were devastating St. Louis, pursuing women through the street and stripping them naked, he suggested that I “let up on that labor crowd.” No other instances of “capitalistic arrogance” occur to memory.

Hearst, he would declare, was the most indulgent of employers, and would never discharge a member of his staff for any cause. If a reporter were particularly worthless,

drunken, and abusive of his master when among his associates, Hearst would invariably promote him. And, went on Bierce, it proved to be good policy. But then, he would add, Hearst knew his man pretty well before he employed him, and always asked but one qualification: that the employee have more gray matter than any other man—for the particular journalistic field sought to be covered. The fellow might be utterly worthless in every other relation of life, as unmoral as a poet, as bibulous as Bacchus, provided he were but topheavy with gray matter of the classification sought. Hearst's acumen as a business man, shown by his payment of full value for services—a great deal more than any competitor would pay—met with Bierce's hearty approval.

Hearst's generosity to Bierce was many times shown, and was as often acknowledged by the recipient, but usually with the qualification that "Hearst is a generous but not a just man." As an example of generosity I print in full the document that he gave Bierce for my files:

New York, November 5th 1908.

This is to certify that Ambrose Bierce has the exclusive right to arrange for the publication, and to publish, in book form all of his writings that have been supplied to me and to the newspapers and magazines that I have controlled and those in which I am now interested, with waiver upon my part and upon the part of such newspapers and magazines of any and all rights that they and I may have in the copyright of all such material.

W. R. HEARST

Witnesses:

There were no witnesses. This waiver of rights was without any other consideration than the esteem in which Hearst held Bierce. Yet, Hearst knew he was surrendering property rights that in time might be of great pecuniary value.

In fact, Bierce in his conversations with me said much in Hearst's praise, and particularly in regard to his generosity and his courage in assuming full responsibility for all that was said in his newspapers. Time and again some member of his staff would write some fool article; but Hearst would shield him and silently take the blame. Nor did the "little things" seem to disturb him, said Bierce, for the man's eye (both eyes) always seemed fixed on his objective. Small value did he attach to the things that did not count. Again to quote from *A Thumb-Nail Sketch*, here is related an occurrence in point:

In illustration of some of the better features of this man's strange and complex character let this incident suffice. Soon after the assassination of Governor Goebel of Kentucky—which seemed to me a particularly perilous "precedent" if unpunished—I wrote for one of Mr. Hearst's New York newspapers the following prophetic lines:

The bullet that pierced Goebel's breast
Can not be found in all the West.
Good reason: it is speeding here
To stretch McKinley on the bier.

The lines took no attention, naturally, but twenty months afterward the President was shot by Czolgosz. Every one remembers what happened then to Mr. Hearst and his newspapers. His political enemies and business competitors were alert to their opportunity. The verses, variously garbled but mostly made into an editorial, or a news dispatch with a Washington date-line but usually no date, were published all over the country as evidence of Mr. Hearst's complicity in the crime. As such they adorned the editorial columns of the New York *Sun* and blazed upon a bill-board in front of Tammany Hall. So fierce was the popular flame to which they were the main fuel that thousands of copies of the Hearst papers were torn from the hands of newsboys and burned in the streets. Much of their advertising was withdrawn from them. Emissaries of the

Sun overran the entire country persuading clubs, libraries and other patriotic bodies to exclude them from the files. There was even an attempt made to induce Czolgosz to testify that he had been incited to his crime by reading them—ten thousand dollars for his family to be his reward; but this cheerful scheme was blocked by the trial judge, who had been informed of it. During all this carnival of sin I lay ill in Washington, unaware of it; and my name, although appended to all that I wrote, including the verses, was not, I am told, once mentioned. As to Mr. Hearst, I dare say he first saw the lines when all this hullabaloo directed his attention to them.

With the occurrences here related the incident was not exhausted. When Mr. Hearst was making his grotesque canvass for the Governorship of New York the Roosevelt Administration sent Secretary Root into the state to beat him. This high-minded gentleman incorporated one of the garbled prose versions of my prophecy into his speeches with notable effect and great satisfaction to his conscience. Still, I am steadfast in the conviction that God sees him; and if anyone thinks that Mr. Root will not go to the devil it must be the devil himself, in whom, doubtless, the wish is father to the thought.

Hearst's newspapers . . . had been incredibly rancorous toward McKinley, but no doubt it was my luckless prophecy that cost him tens of thousands of dollars and a growing political prestige. For anything that I know (or care) it may have cost him his election. I have never mentioned the matter to him, nor—and this is what I have been coming to—has he ever mentioned it to me. I fancy there must be a human side to a man like that . . .

IV

Hearst must have been a most indulgent taskmaster and a diplomat of the highest order, for he gathered about him the most difficult personalities ever brought into association on this continent, and it is not on record that he would quarrel with any one of them. Bierce must have been a sore trial to the journalist. In every conceivable way (that is, in

every way Bierce could conceive!) he tried to force Hearst to quarrel with him. However, Hearst would not quarrel, but would ignore Bierce's insulting letters and continued to pay him one hundred dollars a week with the regularity of Saturday's dawn, whether or not Bierce would write a line or obey an order. Nor would Hearst see him when the aggrieved writer would call, but would always have some plausible excuse left with the doorman. When the author would become too persistent in his demand for a personal interview, in which to tender his resignation if his causes of complaint were not removed, his employer would write to him a most affable letter, inviting the dissatisfied genius to luncheon at his home, where Bierce would find quite a gathering—usually with a few ladies present. The incongruity would so tease his sense of the ridiculous that he would forswear his grievance.

Toward the end Bierce insisted that Hearst give him *carte blanche* and print in his newspapers and magazines anything the author should write. This suited Hearst well enough; but the trouble was that, in addition, Bierce would not write to order. For example, Hearst would telegraph to Bierce at Washington to interview some public official about some matter then under general discussion, and then give the Hearst subscribers the benefit of his views and criticisms. Instantly Bierce would indignantly refuse, saying that he was no reporter, no news man, and that he would not descend to detective work. Apparently he forgot that he had gone to Washington from San Francisco to cover for Hearst the principal scandal of the time, the Huntington investigation, and had done so with marked success, deservedly winning national renown for his achievement in uncovering the most diabolical transportation plot that, until then, had been revealed in the United States. In doing so he had not hesitated to do detective work and to use to

some degree the methods of journalism that he professed to abhor, cursing his employer the while.

Hearst, of course, was in a position to know the type of Bierce's work that was most popular, the kind that added to the circulation of the Hearst publications—of the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, for example. He had found *Kings of*



Swinnerton's conception of Ambrose Bierce
and (incidentally) Collis P. Huntington

Beasts, commonly known as the "Little Johnny" stories, the trump card. Bierce got so sick of "Little Johnny" after parading that youngster before the public for years that, he declared to me, he simply could not write another line

of him — and would not try to do so. Besides, he said, he had a number of unprinted short stories on hand and wished to devote more of his time to short fiction. But Hearst, in common with other publishers of magazines and newspapers, would seldom have anything to do with Bierce's short-stories; nor would the general public; nor will the general public even to this day.

Time came when Bierce ceased to supply copy; but Hearst continued to send that weekly check of one hundred dollars and to ignore Bierce's frequent letters of complaint. At length the point was reached where the disgruntled writer, in very shame, either had to send in copy or stop cashing checks. He consulted me about the matter, and I told him that he had no just cause of grievance, in view of all the circumstances, and that if he were unwilling to supply any more of the "Little Johnny" stuff (a long time had elapsed since a request had come from Hearst for copy), he and Hearst could easily enough decide upon one or more types of literary work that would be satisfactory to both. Indeed, acting upon similar advice that I had given him in the past, Bierce had supplied Hearst with splendid new copy, which had "pulled" in a way to amaze the editor, and Bierce had even consented to "sit in" at a few "stunts" that Hearst had originated and that Bierce had ridiculed as being asinine. The latter seems to have been right, too, for the "stunts" didn't "pull," and were soon abandoned.

However, as I have said, the time came when Bierce, in common decency, either had to turn in copy or turn back checks; so, despite my advice to the contrary, he resigned. Why? He never explained; but I am certain that he thought that Hearst would refuse to accept his resignation, or would ignore it and continue to send the weekly check. Consequently, he would tell me every time we met (which was usually at least twice a day for several days at a time twice

a month when I would be in Washington) the terms upon which he would consent to return to Hearst, which were as follows: an abject apology from his former employer, a check for not less than payment for the full time of his unemployment at the rate of one hundred dollars a week, with interest at six per cent, and the publication of at least one short-story a month in the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, the character of that story to be solely at Bierce's election.

Now, contrary to Hearst's usual methods, that gentleman took Bierce at his word, silently accepted his resignation, and never had any further intercourse with him. In time, therefore, when Bierce could "hear Hearst's silence," he came to the unfounded conclusion that the whole trouble was attributable to Mrs. Hearst, whom he counted his enemy, telling me that he had got along all right with Hearst until his wife was given the *Cosmopolitan Magazine* as a plaything.

Perhaps I should add that Bierce said to me, apologetically, that his reason for not turning upon Hearst and "preserving him in amber" along with his other *Black Beetles* was because of his (Bierce's) deep love for Hearst's mother. As a matter of fact, mother had nothing to do with the restraint he exercised: his venom was controlled by some lingering sense of decency that forbade him to set a fang too deep into the hand that had fed him for so many years. Nevertheless, he could not resist the temptation to give Hearst a back-handed slap in *The Collected Works*, which was done without my knowledge (not that I was personally interested) until after publication. I thought he had agreed with me not to criticize the publisher adversely in *The Collected Works*, and I did not learn that he had done so until after the volumes had been published. To me, parts of *A Thumb-Nail Sketch* are indefensible, in view of the many years in which the author helped to add to the subscription

lists of Hearst's newspapers and magazines. He was illogical, to say the least, in condemning the man whose newspapers his writings had helped to circulate. He was estopped.

To the end, I believe, Hearst was genuinely fond of Bierce and would have welcomed him back with open arms on his own terms—indeed, would have invited him to return if Hearst had not really thought that Bierce wished to break with him.

CHAPTER VII

POLITICS AND POLITICIANS

I

AS a resident of the District of Columbia during the last fifteen or twenty years of his life, Bierce had no vote, and probably would not have cast it if he had had any. Presumably a Republican after that party was formed, he was independent in politics. He would have been an Aristocrat, if there had been any such party, and of this I am sure: he thought the political game as played by all parties was most reprehensible. There was no trick as practised by any card-sharp that was so low as to be rejected by politicians. They were out to win, preferably by any species of fraud, and always for their own aggrandizement. At the political banquet bishops sat side by side with thugs.

Bierce believed in an aristocratic form of government—a monarchical form—hereditary, if none better could be devised. To be sure, no government could be perfect, and some of the monarchs were certain to be incompetent, bad, vicious. On the other hand, the great majority of kings would be good, and, as the run of mortals, would be wise, with their keenest ambition to be just and generous rulers. Under a great and good king—a real ruler, not a mere figurehead—government would more nearly reach perfection than under any other system yet devised.

After all, government was ever conducted by some kind of aristocracy—that of Tammany Hall, for example. Under the American theory it would continue to be conducted by the rabble, electing rabble representatives. There were

probably not ten thousand men in America capable of properly exercising the powers of government; and they were excluded from participation, beyond being able to vote for the rabble nominees of the rabble—*hoi polloi*. Manhood suffrage was an affront to the intelligence. At the age of twenty-one an unlettered person, even an idiot, would be given the reins of government through his right to vote. Since there are tens of thousands of young men possessing only the normal intellect of a child of thirteen to one who has attained to some degree of wisdom—at middle age, say—the Government of the United States is conducted by children, ranging in intelligence from the infant to the child of thirteen years—vicious creatures for the greater part, afflicted with loathsome diseases caused by immorality. (More than half of the men examined by the surgeons of the United States Army and Navy were found to have suffered from venereal diseases at the time of the World War.) He denied that the Government of the United States was superior to that of any other contemporary nation. He refused to believe that the American system of rule would “Promote perfect Union, establish Justice, insure Domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common Defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,” and said that these desiderata would never be obtained under manhood suffrage, with government by the rabble that would necessarily result.

Pure democracy was impossible in a nation comprising one hundred million souls. They could not all be assembled in one meeting-house, vote on every one of the countless thousands of problems before the American electorate, and by a majority vote make laws to govern themselves and the minority. If that were feasible, doubtless the action of the democracy in Athens would be repeated and another Socrates be put to death; the scene in Jerusalem be re-enacted,

when the rabble, in pure democracy assembled, sentenced Jesus to be crucified. Representative government could never be better, since it would represent pure democracy—or misrepresent it.

As to self-government, there had never been any such thing; there could be no such thing. Men cannot govern themselves. The very term *government* implies the use of external force, and *force* implies punishment. Men do not deliberately punish themselves. The child cries out when spanked. It has never been known to spank itself! But Americans take pride in their "self-government." It must never be taken from them, they shout. Imagine a rabble inflicting punishment upon itself! Its individual members cannot control themselves, much less govern themselves, and they resent the force with which they are kept partly under control. They cherish freedom—the freedom under "self-control," the freedom of license. Being unlettered, they are unfamiliar with the precept *obedientia legibus summa est et unica libertas*, which would not be understood by them if patiently explained in the English language. They know little more of English than they do of Latin.

II

Bierce fought throughout the Civil War without the least notion of what he was fighting for, as he said; but, after he had reached years of discretion and had thought deeply upon American political problems, he came to the conclusion that he had fought on the right side. Not only did he think that the Union should have been preserved under the circumstances then existent, but he came to realize that the only question involved in the war, under the political theory then in vogue, was whether or not the Union should be preserved. North as well as South had fought to uphold States rights, with the exception that the Federals denied the right

of a State to withdraw from the Union—a denial of sovereignty, yet they had fought to preserve a Union of sovereign States. The War left the Constitution exactly as it was before Secession, except that no State would be able to cancel the Treaty of 1789 (The Constitution of the United States), and State sovereignty, as a result of the War, should have been even more firmly established than it was before the conflict. The South had contended that by a treaty no nation surrendered its sovereignty—not intentionally, thus committing suicide—that the right to withdraw from any compact was inherent, and was implied in the agreement when not expressed in words. A treaty, no matter what its term as stated in the compact, ordinarily was of temporary duration, changeable with changing conditions, or lapsing with time. No nation would by treaty give up the ghost knowingly except under duress.

But, after the Civil War, the time came, in Bierce's opinion, when the Union should be dissolved and give place to the American nation, with a strong government, and with State lines obliterated. He did not hold that parochialism should come to an end, that townships, municipalities, counties, and other local governments should cease; nor did he take the view that they should not be under State authority of the various States as now organized; but all should be amenable to the authority of the nation. States as sovereignties should cease to exist as independent of the United States; all powers now vested in the States should be delegated by them to the United States, or be taken over forcibly by the American nation.

This last-mentioned doctrine was contrary to my views, and consequently many arguments between us resulted. I had written extensively on parochial government, on the inherent powers of each nation of a Union of nations of related customs, climates, ideals, and language, and had pub-

lished my book entitled *The Sovereignty of the States*, in which I had upheld the contention of the South. In that book I had gone even further, asserting that the American "colonies" were sovereign nations, under a king common to them all and to England and to the other sovereignties of which the British king was the head, I tracing the genesis of the United States from the reign of Edward III, about six hundred years ago, to the time when the United States assumed nationalistic powers and began an imperialistic career, colonizing, purchasing a people and their lands at so much a head and at so much an acre, or forcibly seizing and annexing the territory and population of other nations. When I wrote *The Sovereignty of the States* I was yet to witness Wilson thundering forth the right of self-determination and at the same time buying the people of the Danish West Indies by the head and their land by the acre, paying the price to the Danish government, and not saying so much as by your leave to the inhabitants of the now Virgin Islands. Bierce, as well as myself, had known of numerous instances in which the United States had seized peoples and their lands, at times paying their masters for both, and at other times engaged in the common crime of theft from a feeble and friendly nation.

In advocating a dissolution of the Union and, in its place, the American nation, Bierce would point out, with what seemed to me great force, that, in climate, races, pursuits, and homogeneity, the States comprising the American Union differed very little, and in dialect not nearly so much so as in England, for example—small as was the area of that country. In England there were numerous dialects that so differed from the English language as to be incomprehensible to those neither speaking nor writing the particular dialect. Customs, also, were widely varied in the right little tight little island. He would point to my own native State

of Virginia and truly say that the differences between its people in different sections were quite as marked as were those between the inhabitants of Maine and of California.

The rise of sectionalism in Virginia began within twenty-five years after the first permanent settlement was made in Jamestown, in 1607, and sectional antagonisms in Virginia even now are strong. Where I was born and reared, on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, the peninsula comprising the two counties of Accomac, to the North, and Northampton, of which I am a native, to the South, a feeling of hostility has always existed between the natives of the two counties. The people of the different geographical sections of Virginia differ widely, as do their pursuits, and the same may be said of the greater part of all the other States of the Union, with their sectional antagonisms and differing occupations.

The time had come, Bierce held, when the obstacle of State lines was intolerable, senseless, and useless. Great interference with legitimate trade resulted. The laws of one State would interfere with the methods of life in some other State, perhaps remote, yet laws of no particular advantage to the people of any community. A multiplicity of irksome laws resulted—a vast number, ranging into hundreds of thousands. Ordinary trade practices, such as those resulting from the laws of negotiable instruments, were confounded. Laymen, making or accepting promissory notes in New York, could not be certain that the instrument would be legally enforceable in California or in Louisiana.

There were many, very many, reasons that Bierce gave to sustain his thesis that the States would in time cease to exist, except in name. These reasons were not put forward as being original with him. None was. He merely took the side of the nationalists as against the parochialists.

III

Bierce was not particularly patriotic. While he did not object to one's love of his particular country, he saw no reason why love should not be so extended as to embrace all humanity. One might not assert that the inhabitants of one's own fatherland are superior either mentally or morally to those of any other man's fatherland merely because of differences in race and custom. He could never understand why the Christian should delight in amputating the queue of a Chinaman. To Bierce the whole world was fatherland. I once suggested that it seemed both reasonable and moral that a man should love his own wife, his own children, his own home, more than some stranger's. Bierce thought he saw an essential difference. He would fight for his home, for his wife, for his children, and for his country; but this would not blind him to the virtue of another man's home, wife, children, and country. As for the sentiment, "My Country! May she ever be right; but right or wrong, my Country!" he thought it most damnable. He probably would not have fought in defense of an immoral wife, nor a criminal child, nor a country with a bad cause. He said that he would not have done so, and that he never would.

I regarded Bierce's political views as having been well thought out. We differed at numerous points, but also agreed at many. Would to heaven that he had deferred making his exit from the world's stage until after the Armistice was signed!

CHAPTER VIII

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

I

EVER mindful of the danger constantly confronting all republics, and aware that from within attempts might be made to establish a monarchy, and believing that such an attempt would ultimately succeed in the United States, Bierce regarded Theodore Roosevelt as a dangerous menace. He believed that Roosevelt would take advantage of the first favorable opportunity, while Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, to proclaim himself Emperor. In this belief he was not alone: it was shared by a number of persons in high official positions in Washington. The *coup d'état* would follow a successful war, which would be brought about by the Rough Rider, in which he would be President, Generalissimo, and Hero.

In time the opportunity was very nearly within Roosevelt's grasp. Although he had gently refused "the third cup of coffee" before it had been offered to him, if ever offered, he tried hard to seize "the third cup" in 1912, and almost had it in his clutch at the first Chicago convention of that year. After Taft had been nominated for the second term, "by the skin of his teeth," Roosevelt organized a party of his own, comprised of hero-makers and hero-worshippers (the Bull Moose Party) and ran for the Presidency as its candidate. The danger of his selection was great. If he had been nominated by the convention that made Taft its candidate, his election would have been assured, and in person he would have led an army against Germany. It would have been victorious; he would have

returned home in triumph; and then he might have tested American republicanism by attempting to make himself Emperor of the United States. Whether or not he would have succeeded if the attempt had been made, who is to say? Under such circumstances, Bierce would have held, had he been alive (or so I think he would have held), that the hero-worshipping American rabble would wildly have acclaimed Roosevelt as Theodore I, Emperor and King.

There have been Presidents of the United States who sensed danger to the Republic because of ambitious soldiers, or soldiers they feared were ambitious to establish an Emperor's throne, themselves as potentate. At one time belief was widespread that Andrew Johnson while President feared both Sherman and Grant in this connection. Events proved that he had no cause for fear—not of either of those gentlemen. Washington could have been emperor. The Constitution, wisely vesting in the President the office of Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, nevertheless could not guard against a President's assumption of imperial power, with the help of the army and the navy under his supreme command. Nor is there any known means by which the hero of the conquering armies of a nation, glorified by his hosts and by the civilian populace, can be prevented from creating an empire and placing himself at its head as emperor. The trick has been turned too often in history for us to doubt that it will be repeated.

Although believing in a monarchical form of government, Bierce was not prepared to welcome Theodore Roosevelt as the originator of an hereditary dynasty, with himself proclaimed *Theodorus Primus, Dei Gratia Rex et Imperator, Fidei Defensor*, and taking for his imperial seal the polyglot motto, *Ich Dien*,—and *Honni Soit Qui Mal y Pense!* Doubtless Bierce never would have brought himself to nominate anybody to the office of Potentate.

II

That the late Theodore Roosevelt politically was absolutely unscrupulous; that he was an opportunist, purely a self-seeker, and incidentally a congenital liar, Bierce frequently said and, I have no doubt, believed. In this he was fortified by the views that then seemed general in intellectual circles in Washington. In that city Roosevelt was cordially hated, ridiculed, and damned by every expletive within the vocabularies of his denouncers, from the time that he became Civil Service Commissioner until he died. Believing him to be a poseur, a consummate actor for the type of audience that he drew, Bierce, being possessed in a less degree of the same affectations, naturally hated their display by Roosevelt—or by any other.

When Roosevelt organized the "Ananias Club," Bierce said that the club was created in self-defense, and was a clever move. The President had reached an *impasse*. Nobody in Washington believed a word he said. Hundreds, even thousands, visiting Washington on the Nation's business, would leave the White House, repeating the President's assurance to them—to find themselves denounced within an hour as common liars. His promises, said Bierce, were as ropes of sand, even if so loose and scattered that the grains could not be strung.

Some of Roosevelt's antics amused Bierce greatly; and, at the same time, they made him sternly indignant. I will give as an example an anecdote as Bierce related it to me—one that went the rounds at the Army and Navy Club:

At times Roosevelt would use his army as a plaything. Doubtless that was an excellent plan, devised by Elihu Root while Secretary of War, by which the physical fitness of army officers would be tested by long horseback rides. But nothing of this sort was in Roosevelt's mind when one day

he extended an invitation to numerous officers of the Army stationed in Washington—an invitation in the nature of a command—that they report to him at dawn the next Sunday morning at the southeast entrance of the National Zoological Park for a “pleasure hike” of some fifteen or twenty miles up Rock Creek Valley, or elsewhere. The weather was most inclement. Some of the officers were of high rank, aged, and soon to be retired. They raised the devil among themselves at the Army and Navy Club while Bierce was present, and denounced their Commander in-Chief in unmeasured terms. Their epithets were large and juicy. But orders were orders; theirs but to do or die.

So youth, middle age, and near-old-age were found by the President assembled on the east bank of Rock Creek, in the National Zoological Park, at daybreak one Sunday morning. A typical Washington sleet was in progress; the waters of the small stream had swollen and were rushing madly toward the Potomac; the narrow bridge of timber had been swept away. Nowhere, however, was the water more than chest deep. The “dauntless hero of San Juan Hill” soon arrived, looked at the débris of the bridge and at the floating ice in the maddened creek, then plunged in, waving his stalwart right hand above his head in the martial Marmion manner, as if to say, “Charge, Chester, charge! On, Stanley, on!” What he actually said was, “Come on in, boys; the water’s fine!” Accoutered as they were, they plunged in and braved the storming waters.

Roosevelt, of course, was first to reach the opposite bank, doubtless by design on the part of his army. The bank, covered with sleet, was so slippery that the President could get no foothold. Panting, his rotund abdomen protesting, he finally cried, “Help, General, or I sink!” A major-general was standing by, in the water, up to his armpits. He and several other officers had not gone to the rescue during the

fearful struggle of their commander. But now they rushed forward and, with zeal far surpassing necessity, boosted him up the bank—but allowed him to slide down into the water several times before they finally hoisted his exhausted body onto a safe landing.

So strenuous had been the treatment of the apostle of the strenuous life that, while being boosted, he literally gave vent to his feelings, in a manner common to the nursery; whereupon his companions burst into uncontrolled merriment, which they had not entirely suppressed after their Commander-in-Chief had drawn himself up to his full height on the creek's bank. Then he turned upon them, as the elder of two little boys might do under similar circumstances, and said reprovingly, in the big-brotherly way:

"What are you laughing at? What do you find funny in that?"

III

Bierce was particularly censorious of Roosevelt's conduct in bringing the Russo-Japanese war to an end. In common with officers of the Army in high command in Washington, he believed that Russia had Japan completely whipped; and Roosevelt doubtless shared this belief, since he must have been advised to this effect by his military subordinates. Russia, while retreating, had drawn the Japanese army far from home and was daily nearing her base of supplies, while Japan was daily becoming more remote from hers. It was only a matter of a few days, or weeks, before the Japanese army would have been captured, or destroyed. Bierce held that Roosevelt had played into the hands of the natural enemy of the United States, with whom the United States would sooner or later have to measure arms, and had rushed in impetuously and foolishly, bringing the war to an end by what he (Roosevelt) believed was a treaty that gave to neither nation an advantage over the other. But Roosevelt

managed to silence criticism and to turn condemnation into applause, and was duly awarded the Nobel peace prize.

Nor could Bierce see that Roosevelt had ever failed to take advantage of any opportunity presented in which to make a serious mistake. On the other hand, he was never forward-looking; as President he achieved nothing worth while; and if he "discovered the Ten Commandments," he failed to make the American people more moral. He did succeed in committing the United States to dangerous policies, riveted, unbreakable. In ability his degree of mediocrity was below that of any other President.

If my readers gather from all this that Bierce was prejudiced, I will say that his judgment resulted from his mature reflections, extending over many years. He had no personal interest in the man, and met him personally only once, and then reluctantly, when Roosevelt, upon some pretext, got him to call at the White House.

IV

When President Roosevelt sent for Bierce all that he wanted was to meet personally the man whom he professed to believe to be the greatest writer of short-stories that had ever lived.

When the time of meeting had been arranged, Roosevelt sent a White House messenger to my place of business in Washington for all the short-stories by Bierce that the Neale house had published. His purpose was to read them—for the first time. This I did not know until after the meeting had taken place. Bierce, introduced by Sam Davis, reported Roosevelt's response to the introduction to me something like this:

"Well, well, well! So this is Ambrose Bierce—the man of all men whom I have longed to meet! Do you know, as I rode up San Juan Hill upon a very memorable occasion, I

held firmly before my eyes the vision of a lone horseman—oh, you know the man! the man in your story, *A Son of the Gods*, who went forward to reconnoitre, to find if the enemy were concealed behind a ridge! If concealed, their presence would be revealed by fire upon the man in the saddle, and horse and rider would go down to death!—Just as that lone horseman rode up his hill, so I determined to ride up San Juan Hill . . . and I have called you here to tell you how you helped to make history!—how that story was my inspiration!—and to tender to you the thanks of a grateful nation!”

Bierce said that both he and the President knew that the Rooseveltian ride had never taken place.

After Wilson had been President some six months, Bierce

V

said that he too was a dangerous man, because unsteady, prone to emotional decisions, timid, horrified by the sight of blood, and that he was unfit to lead a great nation in time of war. Every President, he would say, should be temperamentally fit to conduct a war, since there has never been a generation of men in all time in which there has not been an armed conflict of considerable proportions.

He predicted that I, born after the Civil War, would yet live to engage in a war of vast destructiveness before I should be too old to bear arms. I was of fighting age when the Spanish-American War broke out, but he had counted that as a mere skirmish, and one in which men had to fight for enlistment. I was duly enrolled in the World War, although nearly forty-six years old when drawn; but my class was never called into active service.

CHAPTER IX

ON MARRIAGE

I

BIERCE, in his review of Tolstoi's *Kreutzer Sonata*, written when the reviewer was forty-eight, upholds the Russian's contention that all human copulation is a dismal, heartrending, tragic disaster, blighting the lives of all who engage in its practice. Within the critic's limitations of space, within the compass of his critique, embodying other commentaries than those on marriage, he was necessarily restricted to brief comments on only a few aspects of sex relations. In his *Collected Works* he expresses no view as to the effect of institutional marriage (or its substitutes) on the State, beyond saying (in the *Kreutzer Sonata* critique) that:

Schopenhauer explains the shamefacedness of lovers, their tendency to withdraw into nooks and corners to do their wooing, by the circumstance that they plan a crime—they conspire to bring a human soul into a world of woe. Tolstoi takes something of the same ground as to the nature of their offence. Marriage he thinks a sin, and being a religionist, regards the resulting and inevitable wretchedness as its appointed punishment.

"Little did I think of her physical and intellectual life," says Posdnyschew, in explanation of conjugal antagonism. "I could not understand whence sprang our mutual hostility, but how clearly I see now! This hostility was nothing but the protest of human nature against the beast that threatened to devour it. I could not understand this hatred. And how could it have been different? This hostility was nothing else than the mutual hatred of two accessories in a crime—that of instigation, that of accomplishment."

Marriage being a sin, it follows that celibacy is a virtue and a duty. Tolstoi has the courage of his convictions in this as in other things. He is too sharp not to see where this leads him and too honest to stop short of its logical conclusion. Here he is truly magnificent! He perceives that his ideal, if attained, would be annihilation of the race. That, as he has elsewhere in effect pointed out, is no affair of his. He is not concerned for the perpetuity of the race, but for its happiness through freedom from the lusts of the flesh. What is it to him if the god whom, oddly enough, he worships, has done his work so badly that his creatures can not be at the same time chaste, happy and alive? Every one to his business—God as creator and, if he please, preserver; Tolstoi as reformer.¹

. . . . Ought we to try free love, requiring the State to keep off its clumsy hands and let men and women as individuals manage this affair, as they do their religions, their friendships and their diet?²

But here, quite properly, we have no inkling of Bierce's conclusions as to what would be the effect upon the State of any one of numerous substitutes for marriage as practised in modern Western civilization. His views as expressed in *The Kreutzer Sonata* critique seem to have undergone no change in the quarter of a century that elapsed from the time it was written until his death. But meditation broadened and strengthened his outlook, and time enabled him (with the experience that went with the passage of years) to weigh with larger scales the problem of mode in sex contacts. Yet he struck the balance always.

In so modern an institution as is Western marriage as it is now practiced, Bierce in his ripest wisdom contended, tottering almost as soon as established, and now practised by only a small percentage of the inhabitants of the earth—an institution contrary to human nature as man has been

¹ *The Collected Works*, Vol. X, pp. 155-6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 160.

revealed through seven thousand years—Bierce said there has not been sufficient time in which thoroughly to test so revolutionary an experiment. Nevertheless, the establishment seemed doomed; and, as he said in his review of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, he could see nothing in marriage (or in any order that might be substituted for it) by which individual happiness could be obtained. The fundamental difficulty being in the act of copulation itself, entailing innumerable other difficulties, chief among them the impossibility of reconciling natures so vastly different as those of man and woman, the human male and female could not be brought into harmonious association for more than a brief period. For a lifetime!—that, to him, was manifestly impossible. There were innumerable points of divergence, irreconcilable, ending, after a few quarrels, in mutual distrust and hatred.

The passage in the review of *The Kreutzer Sonata* to which I have referred is as follows:

For my part, I know of no remedy, nor do I believe that one can be formulated. It is of the nature of the more gigantic evils to be irremediable—a truth against which poor humanity instinctively revolts, entailing the additional afflictions of augmented nonsense and wasted endeavor: Nevertheless, something may be done in mitigation. The marriage relation that we have we shall probably continue to have, and its Dead Sea fruits will grow no riper and sweeter with time. But the lie that describes them as luscious and satisfying is needless. Let the young be taught, not celibacy, but fortitude. Point out to them the exact nature of the fool's paradise into which they will pretty certainly enter and perhaps ought to enter. Teach them that the purpose of marriage is whatever the teacher may conceive it to be, but *not* happiness. Mercifully reduce the terrible disproportion between expectation and result. In so far as *The Kreutzer Sonata* accomplishes this end, in so far as it teaches this lesson, it is a good book.³

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 160-1.

Hence Bierce's position that, since it would be contrary to human nature and to all experience that sex functions should cease, it behooves us to work out the best plan for their regulation, and it may well be that the best would be no plan at all—best even for the State and for the preservation of current Western civilization, entailing the least unhappiness in a situation inevitably fraught with anguish.

II

"The normal healthy male human being is by nature polygamous from the beginning of puberty until the youth of his middle age," Bierce held, "and only by the sternest discipline, however imposed, can be forced to keep within the bounds of monogamy. As he advances in middle life, his tendency is toward monogamy, even to celibacy, and this change in his nature is only in part due to his waning physical powers. It is more largely attributable to satiation, to the gratification of curiosity, to repetition of experiences that pall because of their frequency, and even more largely is due to the elderly man's interest in other and finer things. With copulation, as with other sensual gratifications, the edge of pleasure is blunted by use, until finally no edge is left. In fact, the time comes when the sensualist is nauseated: too much pie has made him sick. At this point his good spouse, if she is still under his roof, wreaks her vengeance upon her consort with all the ingenuity of the Devil and in every form conceived by the furies of Hell. All which strengthens the tendency of the male toward celibacy, and to monogamy—monogamy with another woman.

"But many causes contribute toward man's gradual assumption of monogamy. Its practice becomes a fixed habit, for example, and if polygamous man includes in his polygamous associations the mate he has taken for life, life with her in time becomes a fixed habit—and the matrimonial is

the most difficult of all habits for a man to break. And, mind you, copulation in the marriage relationship—and copulation is only one of innumerable points of contact where a man and woman are leading their lives together—is among the less difficult to break of the multitudinous acts that make the habit of conjugal life. The sum of the causes may be put down as habitation rather than cohabitation.”

He referred to his previous remark, that the female wreaks her vengeance upon her man when his celibate tendencies set in, when his monogamous career begins, “these two phases being synchronic,” saying, “Madame never gets so old, so senile, so used to connubial dallyings as ever to be willing to leave off. She demands of her mate, to the end, the same ardor in word and deed that animated him in the amorous hours of the honeymoon. She places emphasis on words, too, and on caresses, and on all the boyish inanities that were consistent with betrothal. There is nothing of the sort with which to supply her demands. Her lover died on the bridal night. The next morning he could not be brought to life. He was forever dead. He did not pass on to his successor, the husband, even the memory of the follies of courtship. In sooth, the male mate could not be brought even to surmise what he the lover had done, since he was reluctant to speculate on situations so absurd as those into which his predecessor, the wooer, had been inveigled. Among woman’s multiple conceptions, there is not that of the many deaths of a man in his numerous phases as he makes progress toward old age and wisdom. She can see nothing incongruous in a savant skipping rope, in a philosopher playing tiddle-de-winks, in an aged husband uxoriously kissing his old wife’s withered lips. Even the very, very old woman looks with loathing upon her capon spouse.

“Having sensed the polygamous nature of her mate through all the dreary years preceding middle age, Madame

becomes suspicious as her husband gradually conforms to the 'innocuous desuetude' of monogamy, and is certain that some rival (or many) has robbed her hearth. The air, thick with flying fur from the start of the matrimonial journey, now becomes overladen. It is time to call in Havelock Ellis. He alone can satisfactorily explain this phase of 'happiness' in wedlock. The situation was not foreseen by Marie Corelli; but Laura Jean Libbey, in *When His Love Grew Cold* and in *Lovers Once but Strangers Now*, doubtless supplied excellent homilies on this sinful condition. Now the divorce courts unravel the entanglement."

Thus had Bierce philosophized. He continued:

"Despite the caravans of evils that travel over the trails of the Saharas of monogamy and polygamy, both those estates have this in their favor: they reduce copulation to a minimum of frequency yet relieve the mind of the load of lust that is incessantly born of celibacy. Paradoxically, monogamy and polygamy *are* celibacy; at least, under their practice the body and the mind reach the nearest approach to sex void, which would be absolute celibacy. The sex impulse is so strong, riveted by steel, that it can be broken only by age. That condition familiarly known as celibacy is no less than a charnal-house of concupiscence. Perhaps Saint Paul had in mind the consuming flames of the single estate when he advised that it is better to marry than to burn. In matrimony and its substitutes, however, sex occupies but little of man's thought and time. His active adult sex years are but half of a short life and, even with the most voluptuous of mates, consumes but a few moments of the day, week, month, or year given to sex contact. In marital life, copulation plays so small a part, so far as the individuals directly engaged are concerned, that it may be counted the least of all the activities of the participants, both in the time taken and in the influence it exerts upon them. This is true

even of polygamy, and would be as true in that estate as in monogamy if the opportunities were equal and the indulgence as frequent, which is not the case—unless one owns a seraglio.”

In sex life, Bierce contended, woman was more difficult of appraisement than man. Physically and mentally weaker, through all time she had been dominated by man, who had forced her to his will and had enacted laws for his own protection—for the protection of his property rights in his woman. He protected her only in so far as he conserved his own belongings. Since numerically the sexes were nearly evenly divided in civilized communities, and the disproportion in tribal life was not very great, monogamy had been forced upon woman. For every man had his woman to defend. The penalty of the male transgressor being death, the tribal Lothario was cautious. So we are unable accurately to say whether woman is by nature as polygamous as man. She has seldom had the opportunity to demonstrate any sexual gregarious instincts that she may possess.

“Nevertheless,” said Bierce, “I may here affirm my conclusion that, however monogamous woman in her youth may be by nature, she is quite as prone to polygamy in middle age and old age as man is during his youth, becoming so by gradations, increasing her growing polygamous impulses until she reaches one hundred—the top age of my sex knowledge of woman. Unfortunately, the old woman is frequently denied the exercise of her propensities through the failure of a man to choose her during the process of natural selection upon which he is bent. Here her misfortune is shared by the male. If he would only forget her face and her ‘figger,’ he would find a most charming consort, one eager to please, docile, intellectual, and in many respects companionable.”

III

"We hear a great deal about children being sufficient compensation for the woe entailed by copulation," said Bierce, "and by persons, too, who would not speak of death by murder as rewarding the bereaved. Of all the evils that flow from matrimony, the child is the greatest—except children. The man and the woman who are so misguided as to mate (say at the age of twenty) and produce children until they are fifty, are seventy years old before they leave off drudgery and are released from the countless anxieties they encounter as parents—leave off and die. During these years some of the earlier born have been growing from youth into middle age and heaping every sort of indignity upon their progenitors. Either indifference or worse is the attitude of the adult man and woman toward the authors of their being until death has removed the old folk, relieving the progeny of care for the aged, or endowing them with the property released by the dead. Both parents spend their entire adult lives in unrelieved slavery, quarreling with each other about their children the while, and unaware that the little miscreants will soon come to hold them in contempt, flout them, and probably never give them a thought after the final separation brought about by death. It is a fact, too, that the human parents' love for their offspring gradually grows cold after separation, just as that of the progeny does, if in a less degree.

"In all vertebrate life, parents separate from their young when the maturity of the offspring is reached. In the case of all vertebrates in scales lower than human beings, all memory of the relationship of parent and progeny is lost soon after the separation. Parent and offspring then, without knowledge of their consanguinity, fight each other in the struggle for existence, or mate and breed among themselves.

"Thus the parent rears a structure through many laborious years, embracing the full period of his adult life—to see it crumble into dust. And the interested aged parent has this additional sorrow: he sees his progeny following the path that he and his spouse have blazed—sees them committing the awful offense of matrimony and the still more dire crime of parenthood. So shall conduct continue until all vertebrate life ceases to exist."

IV

"That copulation is deemed sinful by all humanity," Bierce would say, "is not strange: the act is the result of man's direct inheritance from the ancestral beast. Virtually all vertebrates are ashamed of the gross performance. They have the sense of decency, however, to retire to some secluded place, when it is available, and there do their love-making. In the act of copulation the human being conducts himself in very much the way of the brute. There are only two other natural functions of the body that man exercises *in camera*. He is heartily ashamed of all three.

"It is untrue that either the Old Testament or the New holds that 'marriage is honorable among all men,' with the exception of an isolated expression of Saint Paul to that effect. That was merely the Apostle's euphemistic way of facing the inevitable. He never believed it; nobody has ever believed it.

"God the Father when He made Adam and Eve had no thought that they would disgrace Him by copulating, and forbade them to eat of the fruit of knowledge; then, after they had violated His command, when they stood before Him disgraced, His indignation knew no bounds: Unto the woman he said, 'I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over

thee.' And unto Adam he said, 'Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life,' and went on to flay Adam to His heart's content. That's what God the Father thought of copulation. His punishment was more copulation—more children—on the principle that *similia similibus curantur*—that, in disgust, they would leave off. That would have been my method of terminating the gross iniquity. But the punishment failed of its purpose: disgust of satiety failed to endure.

"The Old Testament is crammed full of references to marriage in which the writers of those Scriptures showed their disgust with the whole process. But, since the relationship seemed inevitable, there grew up a terminology that became matrimony's own,—words and phrases that are now used as a coating of sugar to make palatable a bitter pill. After long usage, this terminology conveys but little or no 'indelicate' meaning these days. The words *love-making*, *marriage*, *honeymoon*, *birth*, are shamelessly uttered in the most polite society of mingled sexes. Copulation, to be sure, still remains in the dictionary, but is not uttered in drawing-rooms. Synonyms of the word—synonyms known to the most modest of little misses in their teens—have been ignored by the lexicographer. Perfectly innocent in themselves, these words describe a 'shameful act,' just as *marriage* does; but, unlike the word *marriage*, the edge has not been worn off and the meaning obscured by frequent use.

"If the clergyman who so sonorously refers to 'the holy estate of matrimony,' repeating what Saint Paul said about it, were to hear somebody ask if his master Jesus had ever had a carnal mate [use here of the phrase used by Bierce would be offensive to some of my readers] he would

be inexpressibly shocked. Why? If marriage be honorable, not sinful, not shameful, why should not the man Jesus have mated and reared a progeny? Thus addressed, the clergyman would enter upon a specious argument, in which God the Father and the special mission of His Son would figure, this mission being salvation, not propagation. Nevertheless, the real shock to the good man would be in the suggestion that the Holy Jesus could commit so unholy an act as the one described by the word marriage.

"The Roman Church, because of its knowledge that man holds matrimony to be indecent, sinful, and a form of depravity, wisely excludes its priests from its 'benefits.' Could a penitent go to the confessional with the knowledge that his father-confessor had just come from his connubial couch? To be sure, we close our eyes to the horrible situation in which our great statesmen and philosophers and other honored dignitaries place themselves when they commit matrimony. If caught in marital conjunction, they would be held in the utmost contempt and loathing by the beholder. The coarse and frivolous might give vent to callous merriment. Even the external organs of reproduction are kept covered for very shame.

"If the sex relationship be not awful, why is virginity held in so high esteem and innocence declared to be superior to knowledge? Surely the sexually experienced woman, sanctified by God's sacrament of marriage, should be more praiseworthy than a virgin. But there is not a man among us, not even among all the husbands, who does not place the ignorant unpractised maiden upon a higher plane than he does the wedded woman.

"Furthermore, if marriage was ordained by God as a holy estate, and so ordained by Him long before the Nativity, one would think that the clergy would have some difficulty in explaining why the Almighty did not beget His only

Son in accordance with His own holy institution. But He selected a wedded woman to be the mother of His only Child—a young girl, a maiden of fifteen, who had not yet had intercourse with her husband, still a virgin, and consequently spiritually superior to one practised in the matrimonial arts. Upon her person He wrought no ‘decency,’ but caused her to bring forth a Son, ‘begotten, not made.’ Again the clergyman would enter upon a long theological discussion, and no doubt would explain to his own satisfaction why God when He set out to achieve one of the results consequent upon matrimony did not go about it according to His own natural law. Ah! does not a still, small voice whisper into every man’s ear that copulation is a shameful thing? Here God might indeed have manifested His belief in the sanctity of marriage by its personal practice.

“If all this is not proof of the sinfulness of sex love, it may be multiplied by interminable evidence. But no argument to the contrary could be so specious as to convince anybody; for everybody feels within his soul that mating is inherently offensive.

“Now, if our sky-pilots would frankly admit that our whole structure of marriage has been erected by themselves, not by God, and that they have put into Jehovah’s mouth words that He never uttered, they might be on safe ground.”

I once told Bierce of an incident that occurred when I was a law student. The class fool interrupted the lecturer on domestic relations, an old and distinguished jurist, to ask the difference between fornication and adultery. The old judge replied: “Well, young man, in law there is a great deal of difference; but in my practice, sir, I have been unable to find any.”

“Which reminds me,” said Bierce, “although I’m sure I don’t know why it should, that those who affirm marriage

to be honorable among all men express their abhorrence of lust. They are inconsistent. I seldom turn to a dictionary; but let's see how this one defines the word. Probably it gives the meaning commonly known to the peasantry. 'Lust, *n.* 1. Vehement or covetous affection or desire. 2. Inordinate desire for carnal pleasure.' Anything dishonorable in such emotions? Not if marriage be honorable! But *lust* has come to have another meaning, given to the word by Jews and Christians, none of whom could define it beyond saying that it means something awful, unspeakable, dreadful beyond expression; something of which no decent man could be guilty—beyond even the thought of a virtuous woman. Love, they would say, is something entirely different, sacrosanct, in which lust has no part.

"Now let us turn to the same dictionary for a definition of *love*. 'Love, *n.* 1. A strong complex emotion or feeling causing one to appreciate, delight in, and crave the presence, or possession, of the object and to please and promote the welfare of that object; devoted affection or attachment. 2. Specifically, such feeling between husband and wife or lover and sweetheart. 3. One who is beloved; a sweetheart. 4. Animal passion, or the gratification of it.' Some language! The fellow put on his top-hat and tried to lift himself by his pen to its crown. That was a momentous occasion, when he undertook to define *love*.

"Yet, had *lust* been the word instead of *love*, the meaning would have been equally applicable. There is nothing in this definition of love that does not describe the properties of lust.

"Be ye assured, my sanctimonious friends, no child ever yet was begot without lust—on the part of its father, at least. Even the Psalmist points out: 'Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.' A ter-

ribly sinful act, this begetting of children, and necessarily a concupiscent performance!

"Call *lust* by another name, *love*, if you will,
Yet the stench of the carnal will hang round it still.⁴

"As a matter of fact, the sanctimonious erect upon a granite foundation of lust a tremendous structure that they name *love*—a superstructure that would totter and fall if its base should be blasted. The thing of our imaginative creation known as *love* is simply *lust* glorified. The granite foundation is not impaired by the ornate structure reared upon it."

V

"So far as society be concerned," Bierce continued, "why should the modern Western institution of marriage be its only safeguard, or even the most preferable form of regulation of sex life? Why should sex life be regulated at all? The stars have looked down upon other earthly civilizations quite as exalted as that of the modern West—civilizations in which children were reared without rules governing the sex life of their parents. I advocate neither free love nor any existing or suggested rules for the governing of sexual intercourse; but I can plainly see that children could be better reared outside of the environs of the homes in which they are brought up—with a few exceptions, but very few. Not the tenth of one per cent of the children of any existing civilization are properly reared.

"Oh, yes; there would be all sorts of difficulties to face if the bringing up of children were given over to the State! Among them would be the difficulty of preserving individual characteristics; for the tendency would be to create adults of one pattern. There are thousands of other points that the State would have to face. As it is, every nation con-

⁴ This parody he extemporized without hesitancy.

fronts millions, and pretty nearly all the problems are due to the haphazard manner in which children are now reared.

"After all that has been said by countless thousands, the course of love will continue to run—not smoothly, but pretty much as it damn pleases."

VI

"Yet," Bierce affirmed, "it remains true that love is youth's greatest adventure. Unlike war, love has no horrors while it lasts—none that lovers can detect. Its popularity attests its sinfulness. It will continue to be hotly sought. All thanks be to Israel and to her prophets for surrounding carnal love with the glamor of the forbidden and for making conjugality the cardinal prohibition. Because of this we seize Cupid's quiver with the greater ardor and pursue Folly to the enchanted bowers of Circe."

CHAPTER X

HIS SEX CONTACTS

I

THAT women should be resistlessly attracted to an animal so beautiful as was Ambrose Bierce is as irrefutable as is the fact that the moon follows the earth. The high and the lowly, my lady and her maid, pursued him relentlessly. Yet, he was no voluptuary, no sex sensualist, and was by nature, from middle age on to his last day, a monogamist. By this term I would imply that he cared for only one woman at a time and that usually he was off with the old love before being on with the new. Indeed, I doubt if Bierce engaged in more than thirty or forty *liaisons* during his entire life. If, in refutation of my assertion that Bierce was no sex sensualist, some ascetic is inclined to hold this to be an unholy number, I will answer that Bierce told me that his sex life extended over a period of fifty-eight years, and in view of his opportunities, he might be counted a celibate in comparison with other strong men.

His first mistress, who was well past seventy when Bierce acquired her, seems to have been a woman of broad culture. To her Bierce undoubtedly owed a debt of gratitude. He paid it off in passionate love. She instilled in him a love of literature, art, and the humanities generally; if she did not teach him how to write, as she did not, since no human being can teach any other human being how to write, she at least showed him how to overcome many of the defects of his early training (or lack of training) and taught him in part how *not* to write. She seems to have been physically attractive, even at her great age, and lost none of her charm—in

his estimation. They lived together, surreptitiously, for a number of years. Bierce, when this intimacy began, was probably fifteen, although I can only approximate his age. He assured me from time to time that he continued to think of her frequently, and sometimes believed that she was the only woman he had truly loved—and that, too, with a mad passion. I once suggested that probably his infatuation, which still haunted him in memory, was due to the fact that this was his first love adventure. He replied that he thought not. In fact, it was not his first passage at arms, although she was his first mistress. Then, after quite a pause, he said reflectively:

“Looking back over my amours, I find that women were progressively satisfactory as mates in proportion to their progress in years. Small wonder! In their maturity they cultivate fidelity, acquire wisdom, and learn to govern themselves. In the love of the aged, too, there is an asceticism that is seldom found in the connubial contacts of youth. Resistless natural laws are fulfilled without the grossness of undue lust; and companionship, comradeship, must be the basis of happiness in the association of man and woman, since sex indulgence, perforce, occupies but brief periods in even the most lustful of sex relationships.”

I never learned, nor sought to find out, the cause of the termination of this blending of April and December. Perhaps the ancient dame was wooed by the Inevitable Lover and by him was snatched from the youthful Bierce's arms.

As a lover, Bierce was cautious, at times remarking to the ladies who sought him, “My dear, how delightful it would be if I could fall into your arms without falling into your hands,” which was said as if in jest, but really was meant in earnest. This aphorism is to be found in *The Collected Works*. He worked it diligently during his courtships. As a matter of fact, I think Bierce had no particularly unpleas-

ant experience when falling into the hands of any woman, although he told me that one of his reasons for changing his residence from San Francisco to Washington was to escape the clutches of a woman. (He never revealed to me her identity.) She was making a number of impossible demands upon him—matrimony among others. He dreaded to return to San Francisco for visits, and not without cause; for, more than once, upon his infrequent visits to Frisco the lady put in an appearance and demanded marriage. Bierce suggested the resumption of their former irregular relationship; but, in order to force marriage, she refused. Whereupon Bierce told her that she was a fool; that if she had accepted his suggestion he would not have exacted of her compliance with its condition, but would have married her at once. This statement interested me, for I was in doubt as to whether Bierce was already married—to Miss Christiansen, the woman whom I knew he deeply loved and had loved for years, and whom he continued to love until his body ceased to live.

It is not my purpose to recount many of the amorous episodes of the subject of this biography, but to dwell in some detail only upon the dominating influences of his love life—although, after all, they did not appreciably affect his literary work. Perhaps I should make clear, if I have not already done so, that, in my belief, sex was one of the lesser of the impulses that motivated Ambrose Bierce, spirit and physical man. He was so dominated by his intellect that he had but little time for Aphroditic association. He was the pursued, seldom the pursuer, and when pursued was but infrequently caught. As I have said elsewhere, I once remarked to Bierce that perhaps his abstemiousness in *res amatoria* was parallel to the physically enforced continence of old age. Not in his case, he somewhat truthfully affirmed, and added that even in his youth he had found many things

more interesting than sex dalliance; that with love, as with all other emotions, the edge was blunted by use. Wisdom, on the other hand, grew with the years, and the philosopher's delight in existence was thus augmented.

Bierce was difficult to woo by ordinary processes. But there was one method that with him was irresistible; rather, I say, that he found resistless—not that he was aware of the feminine machinations. Not he! All the lady had to do, were she young or old, fair as Helen or as ugly as Atropos, was to praise Bierce's literary work. The more she spread on the butter and sugar, the more delectable he found the bread, and the more readily were his amorous instincts aroused—or a semblance of them. Thus I account for the morons, plug-uglies, and illiterates that comprised some of Bierce's transitory "cuties."

I recall how one young woman overdid her part. Bierce tolerated her unpardonable errors of oral locution, telling me, during her courtship of him, that frequently excellent writers in their oral discourse used faulty English. This, he said, was case in point, the young woman having written a novel, the manuscript of which she had decided to "let" him read. Later he read it, then came on to New York, saying, "Neale, I shall never look upon that female's face again. I have come to New York to try to forget my one mistake."

II

All those among Bierce's *chères amies* whom I met personally were ugly, even repulsively so, and in every way unattractive. Mrs. Bierce, however, was said to have been a very beautiful woman, of rare charm and of really noble character. So Bierce thought, whatever his opinion may be worth, as did others who knew her, so far as I can gather. I think he loved her—for a while, at least—and he cer-

tainly admired her to the end of his days. I never heard him speak of her except in praise, but at times, while discussing with me femininity in general, he would refer to their sex relations in order to enforce his contention, and do so with a shocking freedom from reserve, revealing the most intimate associations, which may be taken for granted but never voiced.

Three children, two boys and a girl, were born of the union. I have been told that the young men were singularly handsome and in other respects attractive; that both gave promise of brilliant achievements. One, Day, while a mere lad, was killed in a duel over a woman, in California. The other son, Leigh Hunt, died in New York City of typhoid fever while he was employed as a writer by a newspaper. The daughter, Helen, a Mrs. Isgrigg—if Isgrigg be her latest husband's name—lives in Hollywood at present. She was called "Bib" by her father and her other intimates.

Bierce described to me the cause and the manner of his separation from his wife, ending many years later in divorce. It seems that one night, while in an expansive mood, his conscience hurting him as he looked upon his fair young wife, the mother of his three children, he told her the true story of a joy-trip that he took through Southern Europe with a young woman. Previously he had told her of the trip, which was taken when he was living in London, and had represented that the journey was made by him alone, in the interest of his literary work; and she had believed him. Now he had decided to confess. So great a fool, he affirmed with a malignant oath addressed to himself as he told me the story, never lived before, nor would ever live again.

His confession to his wife goes to show what I have always thought, that Bierce had only a slight knowledge of

the psychology of women, and never knew how any woman would react to any given circumstance.

Mrs. Bierce had listened to her husband's tale of love of another woman without interposing a word; then, quietly, she left the room. Her very silence should have given him pause during his long recital; but he seemed to have been lost in his own eloquence while dwelling upon the charms of his inamorata—caressingly, as if in palliation of his offense. He said to me that in the course of his oratory he had made all sorts of a damned fool of himself. His instinct of narration had been uppermost. When Mrs. Bierce left the room, she left never to return.

His reaction to the separation was, as he put to me, thus: "You see, Neale, I had formed the marriage habit, and you may take it from me that no other habit is so difficult to break. I have seen men conquer alcohol, opium, and tobacco; but it took me years to overcome the inordinate craving that would seize me for a resumption of marital relations." With a parched throat, he gulped.

I think he never saw his wife again; but I understand that he voluntarily made ample pecuniary provision for her, which continued until she died, a few years before his own death. Shortly before she "passed on," as the Eddyites would say, the decree of divorce was handed down, on the ground of desertion. He could have had no other cause.

Bierce never told me that he intended to seek a divorce, nor did I learn that he had obtained a decree until several months after it was granted; then, with a shamed face, he merely mentioned the fact. Mrs. Bierce was dead when he spoke to me about the matter. Fate had been cruel, said he, and if he had only known that she was going to die soon after the divorce was granted, he would never have brought the action. "But," said I, "why on earth should you have sought a divorce? Her income remained unchanged; you

have said that you would not marry again?" "We-e-ell," he drawled, trying to think up an excuse that he could put over, "there are several girls I take out to dinner, and I thought it would look better for them if I were a marriageable man."

III

The foregoing account of the separation of Bierce and his wife, culminating in their divorcement, differs in no essential from the story as related to me by Bierce, and repeated to me more than once. But, after the narration above set down was written, comes Carey McWilliams, Esq., in *The American Mercury* for February, 1929, in an article entitled *Ambrose Bierce*, with this version:

Bierce separated from her [his wife] about 1891, when he left the family home at St. Helena and took up his residence at Auburn. The cause of their separation was simply incompatibility. Bierce's wife was a beautiful woman, but she was conventional, orthodox and perhaps burdened with social aspirations. Bierce always said that he would never divorce her, and he never did. He told one of his oldest and dearest friends that he had never cared for any other woman. Of Mrs. Bierce's devotion to her husband there can be no question. But through a misunderstanding of his wishes she applied for a divorce in Los Angeles in 1904, and then died within three weeks after it had been granted.

I accept Mr. McWilliams' account as being true, and I have no doubt that the court records will sustain him, in that Mrs. Bierce and not her husband brought the action; but Bierce certainly told me, time and again, that he brought the suit, on the ground of incompatibility, and he never failed to express his sorrow, in view of Mrs. Bierce's death a few weeks after the decree was granted, that he had not waited for death to break the matrimonial bond. Nevertheless, and despite the old saw *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*, I believe that part of Bierce's story that attributed

the final separation to his confession, when he rashly unbosomed himself to the wife of his bosom and sang of another's charms. That part of his tale was too often repeated to me, too often told with circumstance, and was punctuated with too many oaths directed to himself, for me to doubt its truth.

I took it for granted that Bierce got his decree of divorce in order to marry the woman to whom he was so devotedly attached, Miss Carrie J. Christiansen, to whom he ordinarily referred, when speaking of her to me, as his "Ugly Duckling." By that sobriquet I shall sometimes refer to her. He also, erroneously, referred to her as his "secretary," which she never was, he doing so in order to avoid gossip. Born in 1874, she was about thirty-two years younger than Bierce. They had been closely associated from her infancy. From 1896, or about that year, until the time of Bierce's disappearance, toward the end of 1913, they usually lived under the same roof, in different but near or adjoining apartments. She has been dead for some years, and, I understand, left no near relatives.

There was a good reason why Bierce and Miss Christiansen might have secretly married in Rockville, a suburb of Washington, but in Maryland, and a sort of Gretna Green. For some years the young woman had occupied an excellent position as a teacher in one of the Washington high schools, which would have been jeopardized by her marriage. Bierce's modest pecuniary means and his advanced years would have made it folly for her to have given up her place in the high school. Widowhood would have been impending. She then had family cares, too, for she helped to support some of her then near relatives. I am yet undecided as to the weight of the probabilities. My hunch is that, if the marriage took place, it was at Rockville. Of course I never undertook to examine the records of that town in or-

der to discover whether the vital statistics revealed a marriage between them. I had no wish to break down any barrier of privacy.

The "Ugly Duckling," by the way, passed as being unmarried, and as never having married.

Despite Bierce's love for his last love, his "Ugly Duckling," which he often discussed with me, I think she had no more than a filial regard for him. I am strengthened in this belief by her seeming lack of jealousy of women and by her very apparent jealousy of men. She seemed to be jealous of all men who entertained for Bierce the slightest affection, treated them with suspicion, and succeeded in breaking his friendship with the greater number of them. No doubt she did her best, her damndest, to cause Bierce to break with me—but not until after the publication of *The Collected Works* should be effected. In all her machinations she operated secretly, under cover, and I doubt if any of Bierce's friends and acquaintances except myself had an inkling of her purpose. He had not. Men who were not his friends, but merely acquaintances, she treated with distrust, as if their whole intent was to use him for some ulterior purpose. I am conscious of no resentment on my part toward her; but she was not liked by either men or women—Bierce excepted—among those with whom I was brought into contact. Nevertheless, I may tax your credulity as to my unconsciousness of resentment when I truthfully say that she was physically unattractive and mentally not more than ordinarily gifted. She lacked charm of manner, was devoid of both wit and humor, and was a poor conversationalist, infrequently speaking, advancing no idea of her own, and commenting on the ideas of others only when necessary. She was, like Bierce's other loves (Mrs. Bierce excepted), hardly a creature to attract any man. Certainly she had no "sex

appeal" that seems to have been felt by any other man than Bierce.

The chip she carried on her shoulder was not removed when she entered her classroom. She was frequently in hot water with the school trustees, due to complaints made to them by parents, owing to her arbitrary course and lack of ordinary tact. But she could make a darned good Welsh rabbit and mull beer to perfection—for those who can tolerate the stuff.

I surmise that she (if unmarried to Bierce) had resolved never to marry him, and had reached the conclusion that her only hope of a matrimonial alliance with some man of her approval could never be brought to fulfilment so long as her close intercourse with Bierce continued. They occupied separate rooms in the same apartment, while in Washington, with the doors of their rooms directly opposite each other, with a hallway between. There were three tenants in the suite: the landlady and her husband, who had several rooms; Bierce, who had two; the "Ugly Duckling," who had one. There was only one bathroom to the suite, which was used by all the tenants. While they two frequented each other's rooms at all hours, day and night, Bierce would frequently comment on what he said was the fact, that the doors leading to their apartments were always open when such visits were made. So they were, so far as I could observe during the innumerable times when Bierce and I were together in his apartment.

Let me say here, without reservation, that I have no knowledge that their relations were at any time irregular.

The final break between them was imminent for some months. Bierce did not follow her to Sag Harbor after she went there to pass her summer vacation of 1913, as he had followed her on her previous vacations passed at the same place—at least, he did not so far as I am aware. While on

her way she visited my family for several days, and I observed that she seemed to be in quite a state, although she kept herself under control. Bierce came to New York for the purpose of intercepting her while she was on her way back to Washington. She must have divined his purpose, for she wired to me to find a room for her in a hotel, which I did, and she left New York early in the morning of the day of Bierce's arrival.

"Now," said he, after we had finished luncheon that day, "I shall go to see my Ugly Duckling."

"But," I interposed, "that wild duck has flown; gone to Washington."

He was unhorsed, dazed, and seemed in doubt as to what course he should take. He did not ask advice, nor did I tender him any; but he stayed on for several days, drank heavily, and seemed in great mental distress.

Another purpose of Bierce's visit to New York at that time was to try to induce me (as he had tried to do for a year or more by correspondence) to accompany him and his "Ugly Duckling," with a suitable chaperon, to the Western battlefields he had fought over. I surmise that his purpose in part was to rekindle Miss Christiansen's interest in him by inferentially calling to her mind the heroic activities of his youth. There were other reasons for the trip, of course, including his desire to discuss with me the plans of the campaigns, the strategy and tactics employed, and the methods that should have been used by the Confederate generals to prevent the success of the Federal commanders. I found it impossible to go. I had recently established *Neale's Monthly*, and, besides, had in process of development several other large literary enterprises. He was both disappointed and offended.

IV

I reluctantly enter upon another matter, about which I

would be silent but for posterity, and silence might be misconstrued. Nevertheless, I would say nothing if nothing had been printed. But, as I was told by Bierce and others, several veiled charges had been made against him and published; or, rather, one charge at least once repeated in print. If Bierce was no sex sensualist, as I affirm was the case, it is improbable that he had any inclination to sex perversion. Nobody who knew Bierce could possibly believe him guilty of an unnatural sex act, and his revulsion, when he first read the veiled charge, was so great, he was so exasperated, so aroused to righteous indignation, that, seizing a revolver, he went to San Francisco and made down the street toward the home of his accuser. A friend intercepted him. "Where are you going?" he asked. Prefaced by a long string of oaths, Bierce replied that he was going to kill his libeler, whose name he mentioned. "Why," said his friend; "don't do that! You can't shoot a bedridden cripple—no man can do that!" Then Bierce learned for the first time of the physical condition of the poor fellow, a man, considered a good writer, whom Bierce had ridiculed, lampooned, and egged on to exasperation. Bierce went home.

Since the immediately preceding paragraph was written I have seen in type several references to this filthy charge, none of which, however, placed any credence in its truth. For example, here follow excerpts from a letter written by Bierce's own hand, published in *The Letters of Ambrose Bierce*: Edited by Bertha Clark Pope, pp. 65, 66, the letter being dated Washington, June 13, 1903, and addressed to George Sterling:

No, I shall not put anything about the . . . person into "Shapes of Clay." His offence demands another kind of punishment, and until I meet him he goes unpunished. I once went to San Francisco to punish him (but that was in hot blood) but . . . of "The Wave" told me the man was a

hopeless invalid, suffering from locomotor ataxia. I have always believed that, until I got your letter and one from Scheff. Is it not so?—or *was* it not? If *not*, he has good reason to think me a coward, for his offence was what men are killed for; but of course one does not kill a helpless person, no matter what the offence is. If . . . lied to me, I am most anxious to know it; he has always professed himself a devoted friend.

Now, it seems to be well understood that many men (and more women) fight with this foulest of all weapons, this infamous accusation, which no man can successfully combat, since nobody can prove a negative. Many great men have had to face a similar charge—or innuendo, rather, for the accusation is not often made, even in the most subtle of veiled ways, in print. Having been published, and certain to be dug out by students of Bierce of the future, I feel it incumbent upon me to show the origin of the charge and to express my view of its absolute falsity. Nor could any human being who ever knew Bierce believe it to be other than a preposterous lie.

There was an enemy at every corner—a bitter, foul enemy—who would use any poison as a weapon, and would try to find some base upon which to rest a lie. Unfortunately, Bierce several times mentioned the crime among his associates—a crime to which men seldom refer among themselves—and did so lightly, making it the subject of a jest. For example, he was wont to relate how, one evening at the Mitre Tavern, in London, where Bierce's usual gang had foregathered, one of the party referred lightly to the unmentionable crime and to the defendant on trial in a notorious case then occupying a court. This was not the Wilde case, which was tried many years later. (Why is it that English jurisprudence is so frequently degraded by such trials?) Said Bierce, quite truthfully, "I never heard of such a crime before!" Whereupon Tom Hood drawled out,

in his inimitable voice, "What the gentleman means is this: he never before heard that it was a crime." This "joke" Bierce told repeatedly.

Another of his anecdotes went thus: Some years ago a venerable United States Senator, still alive, but scaling the century wall, married a woman about half his age. After the ceremony, "when the bride and groom had repaired to the marriage chamber," as the story goes, the first question she put to her superannuated spouse was this: "Tell me, dear, now that we are married, what I have so long wanted to know: Why did they put Oscar Wilde in jail?" The groom, of course, lied like a gentleman, and while his answer was chaste enough in language, and described a state of being natural enough under the circumstances of old age, it is unprintable in this volume. Bierce frequently told that story. No doubt the subject of sex depravity fascinated him, as did all pathology; but he laid himself open to attack by unscrupulous enemies when he referred to the offense outside of a court of law.

V

Very beautiful indeed were some (most) of Bierce's relationships with women, and particularly with very young girls, when he was without thought of sex, and (without such thought) innocent girlhood appealed to him strongly. He used to say that there were three sexes, equally well defined: men, women, and girls. One child (perhaps she was sixteen or seventeen) greatly interested him. From birth she had been deaf, dumb, blind, and a helpless cripple. Yet this girl could write, said Bierce, poetry unexcelled by Chatterton, and prose of rare charm and beauty. I never saw either the verse or the prose. He cared for her tenderly, as if she were his daughter, and closed her eyes in death. He supported her in life and buried her in death—rather, he

caused her body to be cremated. She had gone to him as a stranger. It was a beautiful, paternal love.

VI

Bierce asserted, and I think with truth, that he had never violated any man's wife, nor any man's mistress, and that he would as soon think of filching a man's purse as he would his wife, or his mistress.

"But," said a youth, counted a genius, but who was as unmoral as a rabbit: "I have no such scruples; and it seems to me that a man is a Joseph out-Josephing Joseph when he fails to take his friend's wife, or mistress, when she offers herself to him."

Said Bierce: "My answer, young man, is to be found in this question: Which is the dearer to a man, his mistress (or wife) or his wallet?"

In all respects Bierce seems to have observed the code in his amours—the world's code, or the code of worldly men who count themselves men of honor—that is to say, he did so far as I am aware. In this connection he once related an anecdote on a former governor of Alabama, later a brigadier general—not that I feel certain that Bierce ever had an illegitimate child. The governor was conducting a political campaign for reëlection, when a man in the audience, of great dignity, a lowly follower of Jesus when in church and with a numerous illegitimate progeny outside, interrupted the speaker.

"Governor," he heckled, "what have you done with all them bastard children o' yourn?"

"Educated them! Educated them!! Educated them!!!" retorted the governor. "What have you done with yours?"

The answer helped the governor to win the primaries; for he and the State were strong for education.

If Bierce had had any illegitimate children, he would

have treated them as if born in wedlock, and each mother as if she had been his wife.

VII

Said I one day: "Major, from your experience and observation, tell me: Are married or unmarried women the more immoral?"

"No difference," he replied, "any more than the difference that you could find between the same two figures 1 and 1 placed side by side. They are all potentially immoral. But if you ask me which is the easier to seduce, my answer will be, the unmarried woman. She is carried forward by inordinate curiosity, and is restrained only by the fear of consequences; while the married woman has no curiosity, and her instinct of motherhood is stronger than that of sex. The married woman is reluctant to take any risk that would bring her children into disrepute. But in either case, all you have to do is to get the lady to love you and she will fall into your arms."

Some young ass once asked Bierce while I was present if he attributed the demand for him on the part of the ladies to his "physical charms."

"I do not," he truthfully answered. He had no personal vanity, and never gave his physical appearance a thought.

"To what, then?" brayed he of the long ears, "do you attribute your strong sex appeal?"

"Sir," replied Bierce, "to my fame, and to that alone. But, young sir, mark you, I step out of the ring when Jim Jeffries steps in: Fame wilts before Notoriety in the regard of women. The woman doesn't live whose curiosity, whose sensuality, whose fond love, whose spiritual essence, is not more stimulated by a prize-fighter than by a writer. That is true even of the writer who is a poet. Fame means something to a woman," he continued meditatively; "it

means much; but notoriety means a great deal more. It is her life, her love, her hope of Heaven. She takes fame as the next best thing." And he was half serious.

The love affair of the youth, the very young man, the hobbledehoy, used to annoy rather than amuse Bierce as he followed its progress. He thoroughly disliked the genus hobbledehoy. He liked him in college less than anywhere else. "Noisy, uncouth, crude; oaf, slugger, feeling his yet indigestible oats. Bah! Hell!!"

Forgetful of this dislike, one evening I took Bierce to about the noisiest show in New York—*The College Widow*, I believe, was the thing's name. He sat through the performance, but mainly to hear the music, for I had told him the *Barcarole* from *The Tales of Hoffmann* would be played and sung by the "student body" before the close of the performance. That composition of Offenbach's he always seemed to enjoy.

I hardly recall his views of the maiden of bashful fifteen when in love. Perhaps he never associated love with this third sex.

VIII

Bierce used to look on with a good deal of interest and amusement at the irregular (though frequent) love affairs of his friends among young men. Some of them used to confide in him and get his assistance in their adventures. He would give them sound advice, help along their intrigues, protect the improper lovers, both man and woman, and devise methods for their escape from harrowing complications. "But," he would say, "there is not one of you who is not married to a far more charming person than the one you so hotly pursue. Why not call it a day, sometimes, and go home to your wife?"

Not infrequently these amours were fraught with con-

siderable physical danger to both Bierce and the principals. This but added zest. One such occasion was particularly outstanding. Although the male principal (George Sterling) is now dead, I mention his name, since he was commonly thought to be as unmoral as Paul Verlaine, and, in California, was regarded as being as great a poet as the Frenchman. Now, this Don Juan had been deeply enamored of a California maiden, and she was not without beauty of the type one used to find in the Bowery; but she was very nearly illiterate, chewed gum, seldom took a bath, swore like a stage character, and was about as coarse as a Coney Island waitress; in fact, when I came to give her the "once over," she put me in mind of the type of damsel who used to serve beer and "rubber sandwiches" in the grog-shops of Coney some decades ago. But George thought her the embodiment of all girlish charms—for a while.

The California poet found the conquest easy. However, complications soon set in; Sterling's wife, becoming cognizant of the affair, threatened to leave him. Furthermore, the *amant* wearied of his *chère amie* and sought to be rid of her, but was unable to shake her off; for, no doubt about it, "she was aflame with a consuming passion," as George put it, and refused to give up her lover. She declared that if he deserted her she would shoot him down, then kill herself. No doubt she intended to carry out her threat. Bierce thought so, as did Sterling, who wrote one or more letters a day to the Major, seeking his advice. Bierce offered sanctuary, but doubted if it would be protective.

Sterling then slunk away from California, taking a train eastward bound, while the lady in the case took the next train, in pursuit, and made straight for Bierce's apartment. Being mindful that she might take that course, Bierce was prepared when she burst in upon him. She told him that if he did not produce her hero she would put a bullet into his

"damn body," and he believed she would. She then threatened to shoot up Washington and New York, or all in those cities whom she believed might be harboring the fugitive from her justice. Truthfully asserting that George was not in Washington, Bierce "passed the buck," with his sense of grim humor, saying that her lover had gone to New York to submit a manuscript to me. The next day she made her way into my private office, her eyes ablaze, her bosom heaving, and demanded that I lead the way to her quarry. I finally convinced her that I had not seen her culprit for more than a year, and knew nothing of his whereabouts. She stayed in New York for some weeks, calling on one publisher after another; but, so far as I am aware, her quest was fruitless. Neither Bierce nor I ever learned how Sterling's release was brought about.

IX

One evening while Bierce and I were on a joy-trip, taking in Richmond, we were at dinner at the Jefferson, when a very beautiful young woman at a nearby table began an eye-flirtation with him. The passage at eyes petered out within a few minutes, due to Bierce's lack of vigor in his parries and thrusts. After the lady had retired from the field and Bierce and I were lingering over cigars and liqueurs, he said:

"Do you know, Neale, I am inclined to believe that women think more of sex than men do. I once imagined that women never gave it an unsolicited thought—not girls, at any rate. About the time I reached middle age, though, it occurred to me that in sex all might be equal; that upon the concupiscent urge of the man there would be a responsive impulse of the woman, even of the girl, and that the male advances were hardly necessary to arouse female desire—that both were keen for the same thing. The fact that

this is commonly unknown to men until they are past fifty alone saves the world from universal prostitution. There would be no such thing as chastity if young men knew as much as do the old.

"We hear persons speak with disgust of some young man giving to some young girl a lecherous look. Well, there would be no engagement of marriage if he did not. If, therefore, marriage be desirable, lecherous glances should be commended. Lechery *per se* is not unworthy."

He had done; but my mild protests urging him to a continuance of the theme of feminine responsiveness, he went on:

"Well," he said, "as a case in point, here is an anecdote:

"Our young friend Blank came to see me a few months ago. Observing that he was greatly cast down, I jocosely enquired if his dog were dead. He answered: 'Not so; but it will not be long before I shall be dead.' 'How's that?' I enquired. He then told me that he was desperately in love with a young girl of New England birth, reared under rigorous religious influences, and taught to believe that the vice he asked her to practice with him was the one mortal sin. He had pursued her relentlessly, implored her, shed tears, and otherwise had made himself perfectly ridiculous, all to no successful end. The lady remained as chaste as Una, as cold as Diana, as immovable as Laura.

"The case is utterly hopeless," he said, "since my wife is perfectly healthy and is certain to outlive me."

"Does the young lady fully reciprocate your ardent attachment?" I enquired, purposely using high-hat words, in keeping with the dignity of the occasion.

"She does!" he fervently exclaimed; "she does! she does! she does!"

"Any doubt about it?" I asked.

"Not the least! There's no room for doubt!"

" 'Then,' said I, 'go take the girl. You'll find her protests all unreal.'"

"At present there is no happier man in all Washington. The force of this story is this: A woman in love, under no circumstances, holds out long against her lover."

X

"For the night for love was given—" I began to sing one brilliant starlit night as Bierce and I were walking along a wooded road between Fortress Monroe and Williamsburg.

"Not for me," he broke in, "for, I'd have you know, I'm a morning lover—about five a. m., after I've slept off the exhaustion of the day. Indubitably, the early morning hour is the time for love. Observe the birds at that hour, the cattle, the flowers—all nature. Perverted man alone has taken twelve, midnight, as the witching hour."

In confirmation of the truth of his thesis, I told him of a manuscript by a physician, a gynecologist, that had been submitted to *Neale's Monthly*, in which the savant had worked out a splendid solution of the whole problem. Said the man of medicine:

"This very serious matter of begetting progeny does not receive the consideration it deserves from prospective parents. A man returns to his home at the end of the day's labor, exhausted, and he finds his good wife in the same condition; yet, before closing their eyes in sleep, they proceed to disregard utterly the rights of the future generation. This may account for that sleepy, tired feeling so characteristic of so many married men and women. An hour or two of preliminary slumber would probably fit them for parenthood; so I suggest that a simple solution of the matter would be the purchase of an alarm clock—which may be had for eighty-nine cents, and is thus within the reach of all prospective parents—and that the alarm be set at twelve,

midnight, say, which would be in keeping with the convention of lovers—the romantic hour, I believe it is called.”

“An admirable suggestion,” commented Bierce with mock solemnity. “I hope you accepted the manuscript and published it.”

XI

One day Bierce met a young acquaintance who was in a great state of elation, who blurted out that the cause was a successful termination of his advances to a young Catholic girl.

“Poor boy!” exclaimed Bierce. “Poor, poor fellow!”

“Why?” queried the youth.

“Because,” answered the Major, “your wife will find out all about it. Right in this town of Washington I had a passing *liaison* with a young Catholic. Her confessor knew me slightly and used to smile affably as we passed in the street. Suddenly his whole manner changed. He would glare at me with malignant eyes. One evening I asked Maggie the cause. ‘Shure, sorr,’ she said; ‘an’ Oi wint to confission.’ Now, that sinful wench was mortally afraid that our affair would become known, yet she had taken the very best way to make it town talk; so I said casually: ‘Maggie, I think I might just as well let everybody know of my love for you.’ ‘Och, be jabers, sorr!’ she cried in great alarm; ‘indade, an yez wouldn’t be afther doin’ the sich!’ I finally calmed her. Of course I would not have told on the girl for anything; but she thought she had a perfect right to tell her priest of her love affair, bringing my name in, while I had no right to mention the matter at all. You’ll find out that your latest love will confess to her priest and that he will unwittingly betray her secret despite the inviolability of the confessional. It will wreck your home.”

Maggie was one of the few of Bierce’s lowly adulterous associates. With her, as with others of lowly life, his rela-

tionship was infrequent. None of his mistresses was of Maggie's class. The women with whom he consorted from time to time were usually ugly, but well born, educated, and of some consequence.

XII

As I have said, I know for certain of no illegitimate Bierce children, and I think Bierce knew of none—for certain. But he was a good deal interested in rumors to the effect that a prominent Californian actress was his daughter. Well, the young lady, reading of Bierce's arrival in New York, where she was filling an engagement in a new play, got into touch with him and wrote to tender him a box for himself and any friend, he and the friend to call on her at her dressing-room after the performance. Bierce, keenly alive to the situation, asked me to be the friend.

Together we went. Before going, we discussed the probability of her paternity, and he said that she *might* be his daughter; he could tell better after giving her "the once over." Beswitch me if she didn't look like Bierce himself—more like him than he looked like himself! In fact, the resemblance was startling, and disturbed the Major throughout the performance.

When we went to the dressing-room, in which a negro maid presided as chaperon, the twain rushed into each other's arms. I was appalled by the fervor of their embrace. The ensuing conversation, in which I took no part, was so rapid that I could scarcely follow it, and I thought the sun would rise before we could take our departure.

Said I the next day: "Major, did you meet your daughter last night?" I knew he would not reply affirmatively, but would, if he had any doubt as to her paternity, give me a hint. In reply to my question, he cryptically remarked: "Neale, I shall not add to my many indiscretions."

CHAPTER XI

WHENCE AND WHITHER?

I

IT may be well, by way of preface to this chapter, to quote in full Bierce's essay entitled *Immortality* as it appears in his *Collected Works*, Vol. XI, pages 246-252, which I do:

The desire for life everlasting has commonly been affirmed to be universal—at least that is the view taken by those unacquainted with Oriental faiths and with Oriental character. Those of us whose knowledge is a trifle wider are not prepared to say that the desire is universal nor even general.

If the devout Buddhist, for example, wishes to "live alway," he has not succeeded in very clearly formulating the desire. The sort of thing that he is pleased to hope for is not what we should call life, and not what many of us would care for.

When a man says that everybody has "a horror of annihilation," we may be very sure that he has not many opportunities for observation, or that he has not availed himself of all that he has. Most persons go to sleep rather gladly, yet sleep is virtual annihilation while it lasts; and if it should last forever the sleeper would be no worse off after a million years of it than after an hour of it. There are minds sufficiently logical to think of it that way, and to them annihilation is not a disagreeable thing to contemplate and expect.

In this matter of immortality, people's beliefs appear to go along with their wishes. The man who is content with annihilation thinks he will get it; those that want immortality are pretty sure they are immortal; and that is a very comfortable allotment of faiths. The few of us that are left unprovided for are those who do not bother themselves much about the matter, one way or another.

The question of human immortality is the most momentous that the mind is capable of conceiving. If it is a fact that the dead live all other facts are in comparison trivial and without interest. The prospect of obtaining certain knowledge with regard to this stupendous matter is not encouraging. In all countries but those in barbarism the powers of the profoundest and most penetrating intelligences have been ceaselessly addressed to the task of glimpsing a life beyond this life; yet today no one can truly say that he knows. It is as much a matter of faith as it ever was.

Our modern Christian nations profess a passionate hope and belief in another world, yet the most popular writer and speaker of his time, the man whose lectures drew the largest audiences, the work of whose pen brought him the highest rewards, was he who most strenuously strove to destroy the ground of that hope and unsettle the foundations of that belief.

The famous and popular Frenchman, Professor of Spectacular Astronomy, Camille Flammarion, affirms immortality because he has talked with departed souls who said that it was true. Yes, monsieur, but surely you know the rule about hearsay evidence. We Anglo-Saxons are very particular about that.

M. Flammarion says:

"I don't repudiate the presumptive arguments of schoolmen. I merely supplement them with something positive. For instance, if you assumed the existence of God this argument of the scholastics is a good one. God has implanted in all men the desire of perfect happiness. This desire cannot be satisfied in our lives here. If there were not another life wherein to satisfy it then God would be a deceiver. *Voilà tout.*"

There is more: the desire of perfect happiness does not imply immortality, even if there is a God, for

(1) God may not have implanted it, but merely suffers it to exist, as he suffers sin to exist, the desire of wealth, the desire to live longer than we do in this world. It is not held that God implanted all the desires of the human heart.

Then why hold that he implanted that of perfect happiness?

(2) Even if he did—even if a divinely implanted desire entail its own gratification—even if it can not be gratified in this life—that does not imply immortality. It implies *only* another life long enough for its gratification just once. An eternity of gratification is not a logical inference from it.

(3) Perhaps God is “a deliverer”; who knows that he is not? Assumption of the existence of a God is one thing; assumption of the existence of a God who is honorable and candid according to our conception of honor and candor is another.

(4) There may be an honorable and candid God. He may have implanted in us the desire of perfect happiness. It may be—it is—impossible to gratify that desire in this life. Still, another life is not implied, for God may not have intended us to draw the inference that he is going to gratify it. If omniscient and omnipotent, God must be held to have intended whatever occurs, but no such God is assumed in M. Flammarion’s illustration, and it may be that God’s knowledge and power are limited, or that one of them is limited.

M. Flammarion is a learned, if somewhat theatrical, astronomer. He has a tremendous imagination, which naturally is more at home in the marvelous and catastrophic than in the orderly regions of familiar phenomena. To him the heavens are an immense pyrotechnicon and he is the master of the show and sets off the fireworks. But he knows nothing of logic, which is the science of straight thinking, and his views of things have therefore no value; they are nebulous.

Nothing is clearer than that our pre-existence is a dream, having absolutely no basis in anything that we know or can hope to know. Of after-existence there is said to be evidence, or rather testimony, in assurances of those who are in present enjoyment of it—if it is enjoyable. Whether this testimony has actually been given—and it is the only testimony worth a moment’s consideration—is a disputed point. Many persons living this life profess to have received it. But nobody professes, or ever has professed, to

have received a communication of any kind from one in actual experience of the fore-life. "The souls as yet ungarmented," if such there are, are dumb to question. The Land beyond the Grave has been, if not observed, yet often and variously described: if not explored and surveyed, yet carefully charted. From among so many accounts of it that we have, he must be fastidious indeed who cannot be suited. But of the Fatherland that spreads before the cradle—the great Heretofore, wherein we all dwelt if we are to dwell in the Hereafter, we have no account. Nobody professes knowledge of that. No testimony reaches our ears of flesh concerning its topographical or other features; no one has been so enterprising as to wrest from its actual inhabitants any particulars of their character and appearance. And among educated experts and professional proponents of worlds to be there is a general denial of its existence.

I am of their way of thinking about that. The fact that we have no recollection of a former life is entirely conclusive of the matter. To have lived an unrecollected life is impossible and unthinkable, for there would be nothing to connect the new life with the old—no thread of continuity—nothing that persisted from the one life to the other. The later birth would be that of another person, an altogether different being, unrelated to the first—a new John Smith succeeding to the late Tom Jones.

Let us not be misled here by a false analogy. Today I may get a thwack o' the mazzard which will give me an intervening season of unconsciousness between yesterday and tomorrow. Thereafter I may live to a green old age with no recollection of anything that I knew, or did, or was before the accident; yet I shall be the same person, for between the old life and the new there will be a *nexus*, a thread of continuity, something spanning the gulf from the one state to the other, and the same in both—namely, my body with its habits, capacities and powers. That is I; that identifies me to others as my former self—authenticates and credentials me as the person that incurred the cranial mischance, dislodging memory.

But when death occurs *all* is dislodged if memory is;

for between two merely mental or spiritual existences memory is the only *nexus* conceivable; consciousness of identity is the only identity. To live again without memory of having lived before is to live another. Re-existence without recollection is absurd; there is nothing to re-exist.

Later, as revealed by what he said to me, Bierce modified his views as expressed in the last paragraph but one of the foregoing quotation, as will appear before this chapter is closed.

II

Bierce seems to have advanced no theory of the origin of either organic or inorganic matter, nor of the spirit, if separable from matter. But he contended that long ago life could have been prolonged indefinitely if biologists and chemists had kept abreast of scientists in other branches of knowledge. Certainly, the present mystery was not unsolvable. If a red-blooded animal, such as an elephant, could live a thousand years; a coldblooded tortoise, ten thousand; a Californian redwood tree, twenty-five thousand, why could not all life be extended indefinitely? Barring accidental death, it would seem that man should live forever, in perfect health, and in the prime of physical manhood. In that condition, if he should live ten million years, he might become as wise as Deity; in fact, longevity might account for Deity, though not for His origin. No theologian nor biologist nor geologist has yet accounted for the genesis of anything.

III

As to personal immortality, Bierce held that it was not achievable through one's posterity. If it were, it would be of little benefit to us mortals thus to put on immortality. In thirteen generations a man resolves into a product of 4,096 ancestors, and his personality in the course of his pos-

terity would be disseminated among innumerable descendants. There would be little of his original essence in any one. "No, Neale," he would say. "I take the cash and let the credit go. There is no 'distant drum'." Yet, I think, he was far from certain that immortality was but a phantom.

Nevertheless, he could not see how personal immortality could survive physical death, for many reasons. For one, he would contend that the mind or spirit or soul of man was the product of his physical being, the result of chemical combinations. If the spirit had been wandering at large, ready to seize upon some physical being, it was passing strange that it should come upon and occupy the physical body in fragments. The newly-born infant is without mind; but he gradually acquires reasoning faculties—spirit, soul, personality, or whatever term may be applicable to the ego that by some is presumed to be immortal. So the human creature develops, passing through as many physical and mental changes as there are fractions of seconds in his life, and never at any given moment is precisely the same biologically and spiritually that he was the moment before. He waxes to intellectual maturity; then his soul begins to leave him. It does not leap forth with a bound, but departs fragmentarily, in fractions of a second, in the least measure of time imaginable. If the human body lives long enough, it lives without a soul, without organized intellect—lives in senility. With his scalpel, the surgeon can hasten the soul's departure, its fragmentary exit, by removing parts of the brain from time to time, and witness the spirit wing its flight hour by hour as he operates.

"Of these quintillions of personalities bearing the name of one man, which shall survive after death? Shall each and every one, or only one? Or shall the personality of a group survive? If that of a group, which particular group?—the

one that comprised the infant when a year old?—the one that constituted the ripe scholar?—the one that was a doltard? If a group of these personalities, each group being known as the individual named Jones, for example, should survive beyond physical death, would personality be continued through the rest of eternity, static, unamenable to the law of evolution? When I ask myself what has become of Ambrose Bierce the youth, who fought at Chickamauga, I am bound to answer that he is dead. Some little of him survives in my memory, but many of him are absolutely dead and gone. Am I to believe that the spirit of that young man survives as a personality in Heaven, or in Hell?—am I to believe that quintillions of the late departed Ambrose Bierce, each a personality, are floating out in space, or otherwise occupying the unrevealed dominions of God, or the caverns of the Devil?

“Then, too, time is an important factor in any consideration of the probability of immortality. If the soul be independent of the physical body, it must have existed always, and it must be imperishable. The intellect is unable to grasp a condition in which Time could have originated. Always there must have been time. It is inconceivable that a full-blown soul was created offhand by an omnipotent being for the occupation of a human body for only three-score-years-and-ten, in a period of eternity in which there was no beginning and which can have no end. We are all living right now in the middle of eternity; all who have lived were also in the center of eternity; all who shall live after us will exist exactly midway. It is beyond belief that a soul shall have no end, or that it should begin in the middle of time.”

IV

“The myriad cells that comprise the human body as a whole—not the brain alone—account for the mind, the

soul. Death is not an occurrence in which all the cells die simultaneously: death is not instantaneous: all the cells of the body are not dead at the given moment familiarly known as death. Yet, there are metaphysicians who contend that when a physician, in the ordinary course of his practice, announces his patient dead (although aware that at the time nearly all the cells are alive), the patient's 'immortal soul' has flown to its 'Maker.' The cells necessary to the functioning of certain vital organs are dead, or some of them, to be sure; but the vast majority are still alive when 'death' occurs. Furthermore, throughout life there is a process of death, cells living a brief life, dying, and giving place to others. As I have already explained, the new cells do not sustain the personalities created by the old, beyond (in some) a very limited memory, which is an inheritance. If each cell of the myriads that constitute the human body is a complete animal in itself, as scientists aver, then the aggregate that, at any given moment, comprises the being known as Ambrose Bierce, may—and does—within the fraction of a second, change into another Ambrose Bierce; for each cell contributes to the entire body of cells that is Ambrose Bierce, and the cells are constantly dying, and other cells are momentarily taking their place.

"What becomes of each of the personalities of a pound of microcosms cut from the human macrocosmic whole when kept alive by proper nourishment in a suitable temperature? Does each possess a personality and a soul of its own?—or does the aggregate function as a single spiritual entity?—the man Jones, for example, but Jones as a different entity from Smith, whose pound of flesh had been removed, to become the personality known as Jones. Are the cells that comprise the pound of flesh that once belonged to Smith kept alive by the 'immortal' spirit that once animated their master? How do they function?—each cell as a per-

sonality?—or, do all the cells comprise a single personality? And to what extent has the group of cells known as Smith been affected by the separation from them of a colony of one pound—that same pound of flesh—and by their detainment and preservation in a glass jar? Such questions must give pause to the metaphysician. Before he can get far along the road of his philosophy, he must discover the essence known as *life*.

“It very well may be that *life* does not essentially differ in any organic matter. I should hesitate to say that in vegetables, or in brute animals, it differs in essence from life in philosophic man, or even in God, if it *is* an essence apart from matter and its chemical reactions. Individuality, the result of combinations of innumerable cellular personalities, exists in lowly forms of animal organisms, and in vegetables. Each tree is stamped with individuality; the conduct of any species of reptile may be foretold; the growth of an onion, its manner of life, is well known. Every living thing is possessed of individuality, or so it would seem. Hardly is it true that man, if he has a deathless single soul, is alone among earthly creatures dowered with immortality. Yet, we cannot conceive of an immortal ox, tree, worm, or louse. Nor can I when looking upon the mummy of a Pharaoh comprehend that the mind that once animated the thing is still in existence. Surely, that soul was nothing more than chemical reactions of matter constantly changing in form and in substance, within a few years undergoing such changes that any mind or soul of a few years past certainly ceases to exist. Within a brief period all the Pharaohs that comprised any particular Pharaoh died, not only as groups of physical organisms but as the essence that they generated—known as soul and by numerous other appellations.”

V

As to "death," Bierce believed it to be as painless as birth to the person encountering the experience. "For millenniums the common run of mortals believed that 'death' caused, as the word implies, agony, the supreme pain to which man is subject, with nothing else comparable to its severity. The theory was that the soul, riveted in the human body, was grasped by the Almighty Hand and wrenched from its frame, which clung to it with tentacles of steel. 'O the agony!' I have witnessed the death of hundreds of men. Not one seemed to suffer the least in the act. Suffering, intense suffering, may precede death; but the victim (or beneficiary) is unaware when death occurs, so painless is it."

VI

"Religion as a system of ethics has no proper concern with whence and whither. The questions are utterly unmoral. The best and the worst of men may believe in immortality (or not) without affecting their relations with their neighbors. The metaphysician may be evil, he may be good; but his particular belief does not influence his behavior.

"Whence and Whither remain outside the field of ethics. Let men create their gods, fall down and worship them, and continue to do so without end. The gods change as the creatures themselves do. No man worships the same god two consecutive days."

CHAPTER XII

MEN AND THEIR GODS

I

BE it not presumed that in any of the comments that follow reference is made to the Great Ruler of the Universe, the actual Essence of All Things, for Which Bierce had the profoundest respect, if qualified by doubt of the existence of any orderly force in nature. The gods he derided were the creatures of men, made by man—gods as wicked as the mortals who made them, and as good; no better, no worse. These multitudinous figments of the imagination, as innumerable as individual men, provoked his sardonic wit; but I never heard him blaspheme that Majesty Which he considered possible of existence.

Despite flippancy in his references to the Deity and His vocational "sky-pilots," Bierce really had a high regard for the god of his own creation but not for the representatives—or "misrepresentatives," as he would call them—of the Jewish and the Christian gods. I am not aware of the faith in which he was reared, but do know that he was tolerant of all religions, even when he ridiculed them, and that he thought they did not differ widely in essentials, whether Jewish, Brahminic, Buddhistic, Zoroastrian, or Christian. Man created God, not God man. Bierce might have uncovered and stood with thoughtful reverence in the presence of an Indian kneeling before three feathers tied to a stick, propped up by stones, and likewise he might have bowed his head while in the presence of a child at prayer at its mother's knee. He would even look with approval upon a cathedral. Possibly it was true that a real God had revealed

Himself in all religions according to the intellectual capacity of the worshiper. Then, again, mayhap there was no personal Divine Intelligence. He was indifferent, but rather hoped there was not, because of the respect in which he would like to hold a personal deity. In view of the mistakes that the Jewish Jehovah and the Christian Jesus had made—both the creations of men—Their vacillations, Their countermanding of important orders, Their poor arrangement of the universe, with very little of this globe made habitable for man (although Jews and Christians seem to think that They had made the earth and the fullness thereof for their particular needs)—in view of all these mistakes, Bierce felt that he could not revere Deity as revealed by the Holy Scriptures. The antics of the multitudinous gods of men simply amused him.

II

Bierce believed all Western religions to be panting for breath. They would soon give way to more ethical creeds—superior, far superior! But religion in some form would always endure. Perhaps the term religion with him was elastic. An atheist might be religious; and perhaps he extended the word to embrace all deep emotions that culminate in a dogmatic creed—even all ennobling emotions—and he once said that he was inclined to attribute religious significance to all emotions—even anger, hatred, revenge. Religion, at any rate, might be apart from faith and independent of a formulated creed.

I once asked him if he thought brute animals were religious. He begged the question (although I think he had given the matter previous consideration) by remarking: "Men are brute animals."

Late one night, while Bierce and I were following the trail of Rock Creek, we heard a voice in song. Looking into the starlit heavens, we were somewhat awed by the splendor

of celestial nature, and were, no doubt, contemplating the authorship of the universe. The singer had got no further than "O Thou who changest not," when Bierce exclaimed: "That is not true!" He went on:

"Evolution accounts for God as it does for you and me. Deity—real Deity—must be still in the process of growth, changing unceasingly, and in this does not violate His own law. As to the man-made God, the Old Testament is studded with the records of His changefulness.

"Unfortunately, at times He would de-evolute—back-slide—and time and again would substitute, for perfectly good commands, silly mandates—silly, incomprehensible, frequently cruel, and wholly unjustifiable. According to His own accounts, He made many mistakes, which He would sometimes undertake to correct by countermanding His previous orders. He was quick to jump to conclusions—which accounts for the absurdity of some of them—and His countermands, if He had led an army in the field, would have thrown His troops into disorder. Unlike mortals, however, He sometimes admitted Himself to be in the wrong—the most godlike attribute He has ever shown.

"There is room for further evolution of the Divine One. And in this He is making excellent progress, since His creators, who are also His worshipers, are themselves being evolved (very, very slowly) from Neanderthaloids into barbarians. Therefore we may confidently expect in time to worship a nobler god than any of the many that the Jews and Christians have supplied to us."

III

Prayer, said Bierce, met with his approval, and he usually inclined his head when he heard a devout petition being addressed to Heaven—not reverently inclined, exactly, but as a slight concession to the worshiper's deity. He thought

prayer helpful to the petitioner, and believed that everybody prayed, even though unconsciously. To be sure, prayer was an indication of weakness; but, then, men are weak; so is God; otherwise He would not require petitions to be addressed to Him. Certainly He is aware of the needs of His people: it should not be necessary for them to ask Him for anything; hence, one must assume that He confesses a rather petty vanity in requiring a recognition of His almightiness. Perhaps He had in view, however, that prayer would help organize the petitioner's mind, as so many have said, and incite the lazy mortal to get the thing coveted. Hence the approved means—which Deity, nevertheless, might not have had as the objective when He commanded us to pray.

“Ritualism, too, is a beautiful and a poetic method of approach to God. Usually rhythmic in acts as well as in words, it is practised by the clergy of all denominations. Why, then, do low churchmen, such as Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and the like, profess abhorrence of Episcopalian and Roman Catholic ritualism? I am unable to explain, unless the basis is envy; for, as a matter of fact, the low (God only knows how low!) churchmen *are* ritualistics in embryo, employing the least exalted form, which I find so offensive. They prate derisively of the ‘uniforms’ of the clergy of the Episcopal and Roman Catholic faiths—as if their own ministers dare mount their platforms in business suits, wearing flaming neckties and the other glad rags we see in the street! I commend the ritualism that they profess to abjure.

“As to idols and other graven images, used by pagans, barbarians, high-church Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics, their use is not objectionable—does not necessarily affront intelligence. No Chinaman ever worships an idol: the image merely helps him to visualize the god of his creation. No Roman Catholic worships a plaster figure of Jesus: that image merely brings forcibly to his mind the

suffering of the Son of his God. All said and done, if the Baptist has no actual symbol of Deity before him, he has one in his mind as he prays, and it would be less difficult for a creature of his low mental order not to do two things at once: to manufacture a mental image and to pray to it at the same time. I go in strongly for idols."

Bierce once asked me why I was an "Episcelopean."

"Because," I replied, "I am a gentleman; and if not a communion of saints, mine is at least one of gentlemen."

"Ladies, you mean!" he retorted. "Neale, yours is a ladies' club, with a gentlemen's day once a week, which a few gentlemen actually do grace. I'll admit, however, that it is a communion of the gentry; which accounts for its small membership and its relatively vast influence despite its numerical weakness."

"Episcelopeans" was a derisive term that he applied to Episcopalians, and particularly to the clergy of that denomination. He claimed that, more than all other men of God combined, the Episcopal wearers of the cloth were given to the admiration of other men's wives, sisters, cousins, and aunts—which secular form of devotion usually culminated in elopements. An admirable reform movement from within was in progress, he was pleased to note, since he had observed that organists were now more largely males.

IV

They who are fully acquainted with the literary work of Ambrose Bierce are aware that he held the man Jesus in the highest esteem—not the Jesus given to us by Christians, but Jesus the man. No better man, he thought, had ever lived, and His was a sane philosophy of life. Furthermore, He practiced His precepts. That He was not Divine, that He was not the Son of God, that He was none other than a great and good man, Bierce also held, and he was un-

sparing in his ridicule of the persons who gave to Him their own characters. The Jesus that really existed was, to Ambrose Bierce, the exemplar, no more to be ridiculed than is virtue, and, as he did so many others among the good and the wise, took Him along with him in his daily life. That Jesus was of a nobler nature than many other men, he was not disposed to believe; but He was good enough, and probably none ever lived who was better. Hence, in no instance was any comment made by Bierce in his intercourse with me that was intended as a reflection in any way on the man Jesus whose memory he venerated: his shafts of wit were directed against the conglomerate Jesus as made by Christians, and made by Christians alone, not by the adherents of any other religious order. Those who would view Jesus, the man so godlike, through Bierce's eyes should read Bierce's essays on Him. I have not the room in which to reproduce them here.

"The Prince of Peace," said Bierce, "does not seem to have succeeded to any great degree in His Ambassadorship, since His attachés in charge of His missions have been increasingly wrangling ever since His first appearance on earth. If He had equipped Himself with modern binoculars, His godly range of vision would have compassed the centuries, and He and Saint Peter would have laid wiser plans for the unity of His church. He was not farsighted."

The clergy were too absurd for Bierce's resentment, as was the God (or many, many gods) of their creation. Yet he had numerous associates among the wearers of the cloth, and particularly among rabbis, whose broad scholarship, devotion to the traditions of their religious order, and tolerance of other religions impressed him favorably; but the "little round, fat, oily man of God" was too humorous to cause him resentment. He simply made fun of him; and

although Bierce's jocular jibes caused clergymen to wince, his words held no venom.

"What a misfortune," remarked Bierce one day, "that preachers have discontinued their bibulous habits! What a blow to the cause of Christianity! The clergyman drunk in his pulpit (as were all good rectors of the Established Church a few decades back) was most eloquent. More vicarious sermons have been preached by John Barleycorn than by any other vicar. While charging that empty pews are due to automobiles, golf, and what not, why not place the blame on the absentee John Barleycorn?"

At the time Bierce made these comments, Mr. Volstead was unknown to fame.

Improvement of the morals of the clergy, Bierce thought, could be achieved only by their ceasing to consort with the wicked; hence he saw no hope of reform. "Evil communications corrupt good manners," Saint Paul himself had said, and from the operation of this aphorism evangelical ambassadors were not exempt. The situation was a difficult one, since the wicked would in no wise turn from their wickedness and live unless the clergy mingle with them, and in the mingling the manners of the clergy would take on greater corruption.

"The vocational religious mariner is a necessary evil," said Bierce; "but he earns his pay, for he thinks for his crew—which accounts for the fact that his tars are always at sea. And, while doling out wages to the master of the ministerial ship, and blaming ourselves for the meagerness of the wage, let us remember that, although the celestial navigator gets no large pay while on this earth, his full compensation is bestowed upon him by the Great Paymaster when he finally reaches harbor—the Heavenly haven. Frequently, too, he deserves no better earthly pay, the nautical calculations being faulty, and the mariner putting into

Satan's port, the Yawning Gulf—where he gets all he deserves."

V

"Neale, I remarked one day that God failed signally in ordering this world to my taste. 'What! did the Hand then of the Potter shake?' It did; and it trembled violently when it fashioned several of the literary beacons of the West Coast. There is our old friend George Sterling, for example, whose faulty molding produces an astounding effect. And perhaps you will recall that I won the everlasting enmity of Charlie Shinn by lightly remarking in *Prattle* that 'he writes like the devil and looks it every inch.' But I suppose a man's face and his figger do not always mar his literary work; not even when serving as a frontispiece. I fancy that you, as a publisher, often observe that the uglier the man, the more given is he to displaying the mistakes of God opposite the title-page of his book."

VI

Thus Bierce would ruminate during his walks and talks with me, frequently bringing in God as if He were ever in the background of his thoughts; and, since he dwelt so largely on the subjects Life and Death in his writings, it would have been strange had he excluded the Pagan, the Jewish, and the Christian gods from his meditations and conversations.

In a letter I wrote to an intellectual woman who had never met Bierce personally but had read everything accessible that he had written, I referred to him as being "a good and great man." When I saw her a few weeks later she commented on the adjective *good*, and I reaffirmed my description, saying that I had deliberately selected the word as being truly applicable to my friend. I related the incident to Bierce shortly afterward, and he said that I had been

right; at any rate, that he believed himself to be a good man—not an angel, not a demigod, but a “good” man. His technique of goodness at times might be subject to criticism; but the material was worthy and the rendition sincere; the discords were in part due to obtrusive wind instruments.

CHAPTER XIII

GOD THE AUTHOR

I

GOD as an author of literature was examined critically by Bierce time and again. The Divine One's "collected works" were of endless fascination to him. He was disposed to appraise Him as the greatest among writers. To be sure, He never wrote a word, nor did His Son; but he who dictates his compositions is not inaccurately termed a writer. In a broad sense, he is, of course, writer as well as author.

"In common with all other authors, God originated nothing; that is to say, neither God nor any one man, unaided, contributed to thought, to ethics, to art, to science, or to literature.

"If, then, you ask why men should continue to write, my answer is that new writers, as in the case of their predecessors, are desirable in order to hang new garments on old manikins—attire better suited to the fashion of the moment. Overworked words are thus discarded; old paths of approach, having been worn into ruts, are abandoned; new trails are made through Elysian fields. But nothing new will be done. Solomon was quite right when he said that there was nothing new under the sun. But there may be a new way of illuminating an old object.

"Many authors have found God and His Son very generous in lending the use of Their names. What would the 'Oh-God!' writers have done without Them? God himself, however, as an 'Oh-God!' writer, topped them all. The

disesteem in which I hold 'Oh-God!' authors is pretty well known."

II

"As to ethics, there is nothing new; nothing that originated with any created god. There never was a time when brute animals, for example, to say nothing of men, did not have the instinct of self-preservation, best attained by group-defense. Of course, an ill-tempered horse will kick his companion in harness, his comrade; a bad man will injure his neighbor; but the evil horse and the wicked man know the rule of right, the obligations of group-defense. That method of protection would be weakened by an injury deliberately inflicted for no valid cause. While a brute animal may not have the reasoning faculty sufficiently developed to have worked all this out, he nevertheless knows, and I credit him with an ethical consciousness that is not inferior to that of some men I have encountered. Nobody can trace any great thought, or any moral law, to its source. Morality and vice have always existed side by side. I am inexpressingly annoyed when I hear someone in defense of a man of a more or less remote period say that he was merely the product of his time and his environment and was no more immoral than were the best of his era. There never was a time in which the moral laws were not known and practised by some. In all ages men have lived who might be cited as examples of virtue. Defend one man on the ground of the roughness of his era, and I will mention another of the same period whose name has been handed down to us because of his goodness. No; indeed no: I find nothing original in the God of the Jews and in the Jesus of the Christians—nor in myself.

"The great ethical teachers are not the gods that men have created—not the Jewish Jehovah, not the Christian

Jesus, not the Mohammedan Allah—but the great writers of all time: Homer, Herodotus, Aristotle, Sophocles, Euripides; Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Seneca; Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, Tasso; Bacon, Shakespeare, Milton, Tennyson; Goethe, Schiller, Lessing; Diderot, D'Alembert, Molière, Voltaire, Rousseau, Balzac, Hugo; Hawthorne, Longfellow, Thoreau, Audubon—shall I add the name of the author of *Mother Goose* to the almost inexhaustible list? I would, if I knew it. Some of the great moral teachers have been the most immoral of men; but was any as wicked, vain-glorious, vindictive, crafty, as any of the gods that men have created for universal worship?"

III

"As an author, God undoubtedly had many excellent points; in fact, despite the many crudities that His collected works reveal, as an author He may be judged great. He was a radical, to be sure; but all great authors have been since the beginning of time, and particularly poets. (I said 'since the beginning of time,' which I should not have done, for time never began; it will never end.) God, like all other great writers, is great despite His faults. His solecisms but mar His work.

"Upon the whole, the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer of the Established Church are admirably written—particularly the English versions of the Scriptures. Unfortunately, the English-speaking peoples alone possess Holy Writ at its best; for the English language is the only one in which God's full literary values are given expression. The Golden Rule, for example, lacks sonorousness, deliberation, dignity, in every other language. A pity it is that we alone are possessed of the Golden Rule. Even more the pity that we have never followed it—which is not surprising, since the Author of that great precept Himself seldom did. But

example and precept are different methods. I attribute the spread of the Christian religion during the past few centuries to the English Bible. Christianity long since would have been dead if the Word in other languages had been relied upon to bolster up its tenets."

IV

Bierce frequently expressed his pleasure that God, by both precept and example, had upheld his (Bierce's) contention that the sinner should be punished rather than his sin. He (Bierce) had been severely criticised for naming the sinner and fastening upon the transgressor his vices and his crimes, not merely condemning the offense, but also pillorying the offender. He had been censured as being a black-guard when making use of the identical methods that had Divine practice and sanction—damned by the same persons who had praised similar authorship when found in the Bible—and he would point out that God had flayed transgressors with language that he (Bierce) would hesitate to use. After all, how could sin be punished? One could not put sin into jail; but he could jail the sinner, or decapitate him, and when put to death, the wrongdoer at least was obliterated, if not the consequences of his evil life.

"If," said Bierce, "I use the bludgeon as a weapon—not even the broadsword, and never the rapier—I but follow God's methods as an author. And this one of His literary processes seems to have been well thought out. But few persons—and none of the literary critics—feel a rapier, by which they are put to death without the slightest pain, and without being aware that death was about to overtake them; but when God and I seize a bludgeon and thoroughly belabor the miserable hides of sinners, they all die slowly, by inches, in agony, and according to their deserts. Get the better of a man in an argument, and he never knows it; but

he does know when you have knocked him down. Brute strength is all that is comprehensible to him. All this was well known to God before He took His pen in hand. In fact, if you will compare many of God's literary processes with mine, you will find them identical. His use of satire, cynicism, sardonic mirth; His ebullitions of wrath; His jocularity—are all comparable to my own. Adversely criticise my literary methods, you Jews and Christians, and you condemn your God and His Son."

V

"Great as God is as an author, like all other writers," Bierce declared, "He is vulnerable to attack. For example: in lack of clarity He violates a fundamental rule that governs all good writing. The high duty of every author is so to write as to leave no room for misunderstanding; every word should be fool-proof—if anything can be fool-proof. But God frequently so wrote that He could be understood by nobody. Quintillions have been trying to interpret Him . . . But perhaps I do Him an injustice: His secretaries may have been poorly selected . . . Yet, every general should know how to choose his staff . . . However that may be, God's editorial work is deficient; and, like all other authors, He is responsible for the 'stuff' that has been published by His authority.

"Again, God is deficient in authorship in that He does not always sustain His thesis, frequently controverting Himself. This He does in many of His essays. As an imaginative writer, He is superb; yet, even so, a good imaginative writer must be mindful of the importance of verisimilitude: whatever he writes must impress his readers as being truth. Here, at times—yea, frequently!—God is markedly at fault.

"Once more: no author may needlessly dwell on lascivi-

ousness, lust, lechery, incest, and unnatural vices, thus offending public decency. Yet, God in His written Word out-Decamerons the *Decameron*. From the pulpit this filth is smeared over His congregation; there words are used that a minister would not dare pronounce in a drawing-room. Nevertheless, a modest girl will listen, without averted head, to a clerical discourse teeming with language quoted from God's collected works that would inexpressibly shock her if heard in her home."

VI

I once asked Bierce if he thought it might be possible that some of the great passages of the Bible were overrated as literature, mentioning in this connection The Song of Songs, the Twenty-third Psalm, and the Book of Job. He thought not. "If," he said, "these passages were now published for the first time and nothing like them had ever been done by any author, they would attain the same vogue that centuries have given them. This is true of all great literature: it is appreciably similar in style: its style will fit into any period. To be sure, the work of every great artist is suffused with the color of his personality and genius; but in all great art—sculpture, painting, writing, music—there is a striking resemblance in technique, with only touch at variance. The technique of David does not substantially differ from that of other great poets, Byron, for example, or even our modern Whitman—although David would not have been guilty of some of Whitman's crass violations of the laws of versification. Good writing and straight thinking, too, are inseparable.

"So, answering your question with respect to the great passages of the Bible as literature, it is not astonishment on the part of the reader that writing so great should emanate from semi-barbarous peoples and stand so long on its own

pegs—not surprise on the reader's part, but an appreciation of the quality of what was written that today holds him enthralled."

VII

Bierce held that "God the Younger (taking into consideration His youth and meagre education) was an uncommonly good writer—not nearly so good as the Senior, but the Younger had avoided a number of His Sire's mistakes. He was more cultured, less barbaric. On the whole, as an author He had given great promise." The Beatitudes made excellent copy.

That the Gospels were not always in agreement, could be accounted for by the fact that *Deus Filius*, like all other authors, was but an indifferent proofreader. His amanuenses, with a few exceptions, were capable and efficient, but were not all honest. However, both Authors had continued to be "best-sellers" . . . This might cause one to question Their literary worth, since "best-sellers" were seldom good literature. Evidently, Both had written for the masses.

"No author can afford to be inconsistent at any point," Bierce would say. "He must be logical. All he writes must seem to be true even if palpably false . . . And let him have a care when he practices literary tricks, for his trickery will be discovered; and, always remember, there can be no good writing without clear thinking, nor any based upon ignorance. Hence, one should never begin a thesis that he cannot sustain in the face of every challenge.

"Public speakers frequently resort to subterfuge to answer hecklers. When a proper question is asked that they have not the wit to answer convincingly, they do themselves an evil turn by an inadequate reply. Better no answer at all: confess ignorance.

Verisimilitude is the Second Commandment of the writer's megalogue; the First is: *Thou shalt be interesting.*

"To me it is unthinkable that Jesus could have uttered the illogical statements attributed to Him. One should remember that the four Gospels came into existence long after He and His twelve Apostles had departed this life. If I remember correctly, the first of the four was not written until its supposed author had been dead two hundred years. That Jesus is misrepresented in all four, there can scarcely be a shadow of doubt. In them He was reported as giving expression to views that were childishly absurd. But, no matter how unconvincing, millions of tons of ink have since been shed in a futile attempt to sustain every illogical statement and to justify every false precept, every vicious concept. I will cite a few instances of poor authorship (attributed to Him)—His words that many suppose were set down when uttered, or recalled, by His authorized disciples, secretaries, stenographers—call them what you will! You will find in the New Testament the passages attributed to Jesus that I shall use as examples of loose thinking; hence, bad authorship:

"One day a few Sadducees went to Jesus for information. Said the spokesman: A woman has legally married, one after another, seven brothers, she surviving one after another as they died, and in time herself departed this life, leaving no issue. Query: Whose wife among the seven will she be in the Resurrection? for they all had her.

"That was a fair question. This is how Jesus answered it:

" 'You don't know the Scriptures. In the Resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are all angels of God in Heaven.'

"Now, the New Testament had not been written when that reply was made. Nothing is said in the Old to the effect that there is no marriage in Heaven. On the contrary,

in the Old Scriptures there is the implication that marriage does occur in the City of Many Mansions. Let us see:

"Time and again we are assured in the Old Testament that God made man in His own image. It follows, then, that God existed before man, and that in every physical respect man was like unto God. Commentators seem to be thoroughly agreed that 'physical' image alone was meant. God could not have intended to say that man was mentally, spiritually, like unto Him; for, had He done so, there would have been the implication that man was the equal of God in all things. There may be no doubt that physical likeness alone was meant.

"Hence, God has vocal cords, or He could not have spoken; He has ears, or He could not have heard; eyes, or He could not have seen. Feet He must have and legs, for He walked in the Garden of Eden, and often walked elsewhere. He must have a torso, filled with vital organs, since man is made in His image. He went about modestly clad, in flowing robes, which would imply that He has the 'facts of life,' to use a euphemism for which I am indebted to Methodist parsons and writers of advertisement of sex-books for adolescents. Mortals do not deny that He has sex. *He* indicates the male.

"To be sure, commentators on the Scriptures say that there are no ladies in Heaven (happy place!). Yet are they illogical; for God, having created man in His own likeness, then made woman for him—for which I am deeply ungrateful! Yes, there are multitudes of ladies in Heaven, which accounts for the direction in which I am headed—south.

"Again, we learn from Scripture, at least from the New Testament, if the Fundamentalists be correct in their interpretation, that in the Resurrection the sea will yield up its dead, likewise the land, and that in our flesh shall we all see God. Nothing is said about the omission of the torso, of

the head, or of any vital organ. Presumably the organs of reproduction are to be resurrected. If so, they must be for use Everything points to the resumption of conjugal relations in Heaven.

"It's a comfort to learn, too, since all our senses and all our fleshly organs are to be resurrected, that I shall not be deprived of my beefsteak and tippie while on the other shore.

"The spokesman of the Sadducees, then, had asked a fair question, and had received a false answer.

"Next we will take up the parable of the Prodigal Son as an example of Jesus' inability to think straight at times—or the inability of his scribes to do so. To point some sort of moral—the preachers and other interpreters of the Word have not decided just what sort—the gentleman who wrote *Luke* put over one of the most infamous examples of injustice ever recorded, an injustice that Christians inferentially praise:

"It seems that a youth went to his father and suggested that the old gentleman give to him the portion of goods that would fall to his lot upon an ultimate division of the estate. The indulgent father consenting, the son took his share and went abroad to enjoy life. Here take note of error No. 1 on the part of the old man: the son should not have come into possession of his full patrimony before reaching the age of forty. As most youths would have done, the lad proceeded to squander his fortune, living a most devilish life, with harlots, and indulging in every sort of vice. His fortune was soon gone. Then he fain would have filled his belly with husks, even the leavings of the swine he tended, so low had he sunk, so hungry had he become, when a happy thought occurred to him: he would go home and batten on his brother's share of the family fortune. And he 'got away with it.' The old man received him with open arms. But

not so the elder brother. When the prodigal returned, brother was in the field, hard at work, adding to his own and to his father's riches. He was good and mad, he was, mad clean through, and refused to enter the banquet hall. When his father went out to remonstrate with him, the first born reminded the old gentleman that he had never transgressed any of his sire's commands, that he had been a good boy, that he had labored faithfully, yet had never been afforded any entertainment or other kind of honor by his family; that, nevertheless, as soon as his profligate brother had come home, the fatted calf had been killed, and the accumulation resulting from honest toil was now being dissipated in order to regale a spendthrift, a drunkard, and a whoremonger. We can imagine the young man adding that his sire was thus putting a premium on sloth, profligacy, and evil living generally, while penalizing industry, virtue, and a good son, whose life had been altogether meritorious. The old man gave a feeble answer; but the author of *Luke* would have us believe that the reply was a sockdologer, and that, furthermore, the sire's damnable conduct was commendable and worthy of emulation. The writer of the parable leaves us with the impression that, somehow or other, the prodigal son was an injured innocent, and the thrifty brother an adamant ingrate.

"How the vocational saints roll out this parable Sunday mornings!—while Sunday evenings they preach against the evils of our youth and ask what shall be done to prevent crime! By day they extol immorality and crime; by night they shudder as they describe the endless crimes that by precept they abet. To me it is beyond belief that Jesus should have given voice to the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

"In another parable (in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew) its writer attributes to Jesus the act of penalizing thrift and rewarding sloth; if not sloth, then idleness:

"Once a householder went out early in the morning to hire laborers to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay each of them a penny a day. At the third hour, seeing idlers in the marketplace, he employed them likewise, saying that later he would give them what was right. About the sixth hour, and again at the ninth hour, he took on others, and again at the eleventh hour. The day ended, his steward came to pay off the help, and at his lord's command began with the last to be employed, who had worked but one hour, and so continued down the line to the first man hired, paying to each workman one penny.

"Now, it so happens, Samuel Gompers was among the first to be employed, and he spoke up, saying:

" 'How's this? Here I've been working like a coal-heaver all day, and for a pittance, at that, and now receive no more pay than do these marketplace loafers who came in at the eleventh hour. If this thing is not straightened out, I shall organize, right here and now, the American Federation of Labor.'

"He promptly carried out his threat, and a strike was averted only by the fact that the day was ended and all the work done. The mistreated men murmured a-plenty; but, under the circumstances, a strike would have been futile.

"The author Jesus, if Matthew truly reported Him, would have us believe that this industrial dispute was settled by the capitalist in this manner:

" 'Brother Gompers, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil because I am good?'

"Gompers reminded the capitalist that all this was contrary to the Word as spoken by Jesus Himself, who had taught that it is not lawful for a man to do as he pleases

with the property entrusted to his custody by God, which property he is permitted only by custom to call his own. He pointed out that no such theory of justice would work in any labor organization; and for once Gompers was right.

"Jesus was a poet; the stenographers of the four Gospels were poets: so what was logic to Him and to them?

"Poets seldom think straight. That's why they are held in disesteem by bankers. Jesus, as misrepresented by persons claiming to interpret His views, could not have negotiated a loan at any bank in Jerusalem on His promissory note, endorsed by each member of His board of directors. He certainly couldn't do so in Washington today.

"The scribes of Holy Writ were great poets—great in the use of words—but at times they were incapable of straight thinking. To the extent that they were unable to think straight, what they wrote displayed inferior authorship."

CHAPTER XIV

GHOSTS

I

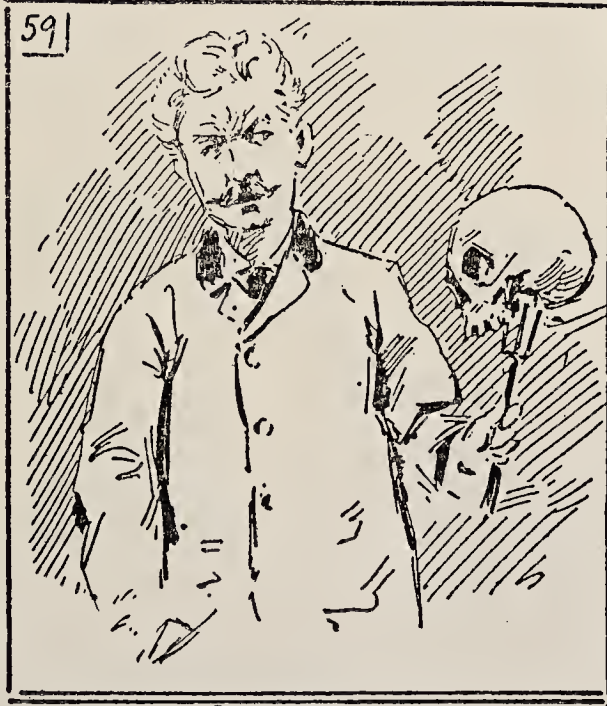
ALL who have read the short fiction of Bierce are aware that he was resistlessly lured by the alleged supernatural. Many of his great stories are based upon imaginative ghostly occurrences. So great an artist, of course, handling a theme for readers wholly or in part believers in supernatural occurrences, with others bitterly opposed to the idea of survival of the spirit after material death, was too wise to affirm an outright belief in wraiths, nor yet would he deny their existence. So he usually left a loophole for escape. The phenomena may have been based upon natural causes; but he leaves the impression, notwithstanding, that ghosts may have stalked. In what seems to me to be the greatest of all his ghost-stories, *The Death of Halpin Frayser*, he boldly leaves the reader impressed with the belief that the writer had no doubt of the return to this world of the departed spirit of Halpin Frayser's mother.

While Bierce declared time and again that he believed that no life on earth extended beyond the grave and that no human spirit had ever achieved immortality, nor ever would, I am confident that at times his imagination successfully stormed the walls of his intellect and left him the prey of the enemy doubt. He at least half-way believed in ghosts. This he realized, and attributed his uncertainty as to the fate of the soul to his ancestors, who had not questioned the actuality of the supernatural for hundreds of thousands of years.

"Every human being," he would say, "is superstitious,

sees 'hants,' and hundreds of thousands of years more will elapse before wraiths will cease to visit this earth."

He once jestingly remarked that he was not infrequently on the lookout for a personal encounter with one of the departed.



MR. A. BIERCE.

Restes du déjeuner à la FOURCHETTE

A caricature of a painting by J. H. E. Partington

"As to Jews and Christians," he would assert, "they necessarily believe in the supernatural, for otherwise they would deny the truth of Holy Scriptures—the truth of the narrations of both the Old Testament and the New. No man can be a good Jew, nor a good Christian, unless he believes in ghosts. God Himself is a ghost. Do Jews and Christians think that He is not with them on earth? Why, they say, He is everywhere, and the Christians look forward to the second coming of His only Son. Tommyrot!—this

idea advanced by some Christians that ghosts ceased to materialize in this world with the passing of the early part of the Christian era! They can cite no passage of Scripture to uphold this contention. On the other hand, scarcely a day goes by that we do not read of some 'well-authenticated' case of wraithly visitations quite as convincing as any of those related in the Bible."

I once asked Bierce if he had ever been confronted by a ghost.

"Suppose I should reply in the affirmative," he responded, begging the question; "you would not believe me."

"Even brute animals are said to see ghosts," I remarked.

"No doubt they do," he affirmed; "at least, in their dreams; and certainly all human beings dream of spectres. These they see well defined, too; not entirely in diaphanous guise."

"I know," said I, "of a well-authenticated case in which a friend of mine (she related the circumstances herself) met the wraith of her dead sister on a stairway, fully clothed, with her garments rustling. She was a bit surprised, upon entering her very late sister's bedroom a few moments later, to find the same clothing in which her spirit visitant was dressed hung up in the departed's former closet. They had not yet been given to the servants."

"Anything impossible in that?" he queried with a sardonic grunt.

"Do you mean to contend," I facetiously asked, "that wearing apparel is immortal?"

"I certainly do," he jocosely returned; "at least, when I am with Jews and Christians; for they relate many instances of the re-appearance on earth of saints and prophets, and we cannot assume that these holy ones were so immodest as to leave behind in their celestial clothes-closets all their suitable terrestrial raiment."

To my mind, Bierce's ghost-stories are the greatest ever written that I have read. Aside from the ghostly quality, each of these is a remarkable story in itself, great among the great of short-stories. I have reason to believe that every plot was of his own invention, absolutely uninfluenced by any other author, or by any other human being; and these inventions are so marvelous as to arouse one to amazement that it should be within the range of mortal mind to conceive works so wonderful.

"The character of each of these things, Neale," he would say, "seems usually to be despicable, except in the case of saints and prophets, whose wraiths appear to behave with some moderation. The ordinary ghost has confirmed me in my lifelong practice: I shall continue to take the cash and let the credit go."

He frequently paraphrased old Omar's quatrains.

"The fear of darkness," Bierce held, "is natural, and perhaps is never outgrown. It is an inheritance from primitive ancestors; besides, one is at a disadvantage in the dark. So far as possible, then, a ghost-story should be read in a dim light, late at night. It is an injustice to both author and reader for a tale of the supernatural to be read in broad daylight. One should be alone, too, and in a chill room."

II

In common with all other persons, Bierce would affirm, he was a bit superstitious. "No matter how great the intellect," he would say, "however extended one's experience, how often superstitious beliefs, signs, omens, and the like are disproved, our forefathers fastened upon us a heritage that we cannot dissipate." Ridicule, as he did, signs, auguries, dreams, and old wives' fables, he would defend him who would look for a white horse when he would see a red head; wish on the new moon over his right shoulder, re-

maining silent until someone asked him a question that called for the answer "yes," that his wish on Diana's bow might come true; show great elation at the sight of a load of hay passing through a city street, and thereupon make a wish, in the expectation of its realization, and abetted him who would refuse to walk under a ladder, or raise an umbrella over his head indoors. It being bad luck to drink on a dead man's name, he would pause in the act of lifting his tippie to his lips and himself change the subject, then proceed with his glass, as an atavistic concession. By killing a snake that had crossed his path, he would circumvent a treacherous friend. He would attribute to his characters like superstitious weaknesses. Since his ancestors were responsible, he declared, he had too high a regard for them to be ashamed of their practices as reverently continued by him.

Definition of *Ghost* in *The Devil's Dictionary*; *Collected Works*, Vol. VII, page 115:

GHOST, *n.* The outward and visible sign of an inward fear.

He saw a ghost.

It occupied—that dismal thing!—

The path that he was following.

Before he'd time to stop and fly,

An earthquake trifled with the eye

That saw a ghost.

He fell as fall the earthly good;

Unmoved that awful vision stood.

The stars that danced before his ken

He wildly brushed away, and then

He saw a post.

CHAPTER XIV

RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS PREJUDICES

I

SOUTHERNERS charge that when the "damyankees" invaded their "sacred soil" and broke into poor old Uncle Tom's cabin, the intruders had expected to find no difference between the black man and the white other than pigmentation. They did not: most of them returned to their homes without having seen a black face. Bierce, a raw youth, did not differ in this respect from the majority of his comrades in arms. But when he got to Heaven—"Negro Heaven," as the City of Washington is best known—he was bound to see a great deal of negro life. It fascinated him. It has always keenly interested me. He grew to dislike negroes intensely as a race, despite the fascination, although he did not always extend his antipathies to individuals. But how he "loathed their black hides, their filthy persons, and their odiferous aroma!"

"Neale," he would say, "to me it is a mystery how there can be any yellow faces among them. I don't see how any Southern gentleman could have been guilty."

"None was," I remarked.

"Elucidate, kind sir: why the *café-au-lait*?"

"Well, suh," I responded; "I shall take great pleasuah in expoundin' to you' bettah undehtandin' the theory upon which my obsahvation was predicated. The cahpetbaggah, suh, that infamous scalawag whom you foisted upon us, that niggah-lovah, that vipah that you set within us to gnaw ouah vitals—that po' fool, suh, who thought he could make

a white man out of a black, tried the experiment, and the yallah man was the product of his near-success."

"I might be convinced, Neale, for I have great respect for the amatory prowess of the carpetbagger, but surely you'll admit that the Southern gentleman took part in producing this vast bleached population."

In time Bierce came to dislike the negro so much that he said if he had known the creature in 1861 as he did in 1906, he might have been tempted to fight for the South—this jocosely. Bierce was a strong Union man, since the political situation was one that he knew nothing about. In his youth he was usually "superficial," and "went in strong" in the ratio of his ignorance, as is youth's way. Hence, he fought for the negro.

The negro in literature he held to be impossible. No white man was willing to read about him; but few black men could read. If the black man could read, he would never read about anything so uninteresting as himself.

"I thought you found him 'fascinating'," I said.

"I do," he returned; "his problems. And no other creature so arouses my sympathy."

"Here! Here!" I exclaimed.

"If I were a novelist I might write a negro novel," he continued, "although I would find its progress horribly nerve-racking, disgusting—perhaps to a degree that would force me to discontinue work before I had gone far. But it has been tried, has the negro novel, as you know; and, as you know better than I do, no negro story has ever been pecuniarily successful; and none ever will be. The reader is seized with loathing. This can never be overcome by art. The emotion results from the exercise of the instinct of racial-preservation."

Not as a work of fiction, as a novel, or a romance, but as a political document, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had achieved an

enormous sale, Bierce thought; and I think he was only partly right. As a play *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been more largely attended than any other drama ever enacted, and while I write there are numerous theatrical companies playing different versions in America and in a number of other countries, long after Mrs. Stowe's work has any political significance. Again, among the more successful plays of recent years (both artistically and pecuniarily successful) is *Porgy*, a negro drama based upon a successful book of fiction written by Mr. DuBose Heyward; and there are types of stories of negro life, mainly of the "mammy" and the "daddy" sort, that have numberless readers. It remains true, however, that the out-and-out negro novel and the romance of negro life are unread by either the white man or the black.

I told Bierce that for a number of years I had thought of writing a novel based on negro life and had fully worked out the plot; that I knew in a general way what I intended to say, but had never been able to bring myself to write the story, on account of the very consideration that had deterred him from a similar enterprise. He had never mentioned to me how he had thought of handling his theme, and I doubt if he had worked it out in his mind, since to have done so would have been to violate his literary processes. He asked me for an oral outline of what I had in mind, to which he listened with close attention, and I will repeat what in substance I said, with this for an overword: if any writer wishes to use my plot, I wish him Godspeed; he is welcome to it! Here is the outline:

An American negro man, so black as to indicate East African origin, had been graduated but recently from Yale, quite creditably, and believed that he had fallen in love with a young girl, a graduate of Fiske University and a mulatto, who thought she returned his love. They were both of

excellent character, with high ideals, and with unblemished reputations. The young betrothed discussed earnestly, passionately, negro problems. Their absorbing ambition was to elevate their race, give to the negro a sense of racial pride, and fit him for actual as well as social equality with every other race.

They discussed many methods by which the desired end might be accomplished. By warfare, they decided; that could be the only way. The negro had shown that he could fight when properly led, and at least one negro, Toussaint-Louverture, had proved a great military leader, and had freed his people from French domination. No other race than the negro, in all historic time, would have put up with the abuses tolerated for three centuries under Southern rule. It did not occur to either of these young patriots that the reason was to be found in the negro himself.

They thought they two were fitted to organize a nation of Southern negroes in the South and to lead their hosts in their inevitable battles. The war would be lost, their nation destroyed; they knew all that. But from the ashes would rise negro manhood, negro womanhood, negro intellectual advancement, and negro social equality with all other races.

The projected nation never came into existence. None of the plans of the young zealots was put into effect. No effort was made to realize their ideals. Initiative could go no further than plans.

But there were other reasons: the young man, in time, fell in love with a low white woman—a degraded creature, illiterate, slovenly, grossly immoral; in short, a member of the only type of Southern white woman who would entertain the thought of marriage (marriage in some State other than Southern) with a black man. The young woman fell in love with a white man, the male prototype of the dissolute white woman. Two marriages resulted from these love

intrigues, and two sets of mulatto children. The point to be made in this connection in my projected novel was this: the white man and the white woman were of a higher race than that to which the black man and the mulatto woman belonged: the highest of the black race would take for his mate the lowest of the white race sooner than the highest of his own.

I did not intend to discuss the progeny of these unions; as, for example, whether a new race, higher than the lowly race, would be evolved; but I did intend to show that, with individuals of any given race, as with races, the instinct of the lowly one is to lift himself to a higher plane by marriage with some superior, however slight the superiority. Hence, negroes as a body, without help from the superior races, would never work out any of their problems: they were doomed, hopelessly doomed to a servitude of millions of years to higher races. I intended to show that this was partly due to biological conditions—to the lack of cranial capacity, to the thickness of their skulls, and to racial physical properties that removed them only in degree from brute animals.

Bierce thought an interesting novel might be written on the theme—a novel that nobody would read except the author—and with the latter view I was in complete harmony. “Nevertheless,” he said, “I would like to see you try the experiment, and I will prove myself to be wrong in my assertion that you would be the only reader, for I will accept an autographed copy—and read it.”

II

Since Bierce at the time he enlisted in the Union army knew nothing of the political controversies that led to the war, as was the case with the vast majority of his comrades-in-arms, he fought to liberate the slaves. That was his os-

tensible motive. There was, besides, the moral urge, the chivalric impulse, and the excuse to justify bloodshed. Of course, the dominating urge was lust of war, the opportunity for adventure, the call to the blood of youth.

Had these bold boys known that the ladies they were to rescue were not "as fair as lilies, with hair to shame the noonday sun, with the grace of dryads," but were black, with rolling lips, with flat noses, and kinky hair; that they were as clumsy as cattle—then, some of the young Sir Galahads might have paused before entering the lists. Fortunately for their ideals, they saw but little of the black ladies, and returned to their homes still imbued with the belief that the only differences between the Caucasian and the African were those of color and of social condition. Hundreds of thousands of noble young Charles Sumners and Thaddeus Stevens went back to their homes to work out schemes by which young Southern aristocrats should be married to their former slaves. It is not of record, however, that any of the young Northern bloods returned to the Southland to claim the hand of his lady-dark.

Yet, it remained true that, while Bierce was in Washington, the plight of the negro was pathetic enough. Hopeless! That Bierce's sympathy was profound, is undeniable.

With him racial preservation was a strong instinct. He would not have mated with any woman of a race other than his own, even if she were his intellectual and moral equal, and he felt a strong aversion to associating in any way personal with Japanese, Chinese, and American Indians. The last mentioned he believed to be little superior to negroes. Hindus he abhorred. Jews he believed to be remotely of his own racial ancestry, and not the least prejudice of any kind did he have against them. Proportionately, they had achieved more than any other nation of his race, or any other branch of it, in the arts and the sciences. Even now

some sixteen millions of Jews, scattered throughout the world, he declared, were supplying several hundreds of millions of Christians with the larger proportion of the science and the arts, and with other motive intelligence.

III

Bierce would point out that, despite the provisions of the Constitution of the United States: that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise of speech or of the press; that no State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privilege or immunities of citizens of the United States—that, despite all this, the instinct of racial preservation had not been legislated out of us, and that we remained prejudiced against every religious sect except our own, against the other man's fraternal order, and almost to the man supported our race, our particular religious sect, and our own political party.

"Say this is unreasonable, if you please; man," he held, "is an unreasonable creature, and unreasoning: but few among us are endowed with the faculty of reason. This attitude of prejudice, however, is not unreasonable; it is inherent. Furthermore, we have deliberately chosen certain views that to us seem the most reasonable, and it matters not at all that those who do not hold our opinions say that we are prejudiced.

"Frequently some editor who thinks himself endowed with an unusual sense of fairness, breadth of vision, and sweeping charity assures us that every American boy who is legally qualified may reasonably hope to become President of the United States. He knows that he lies. He himself would not think of voting for a negro, however competent, for the Presidential office. A Chinese-American, full-blooded, whose ancestors for generations had been citizens

of the United States—if such a person were legally qualified to hold the office of President—would not have the slightest chance of election. Probably no white man would vote for him. The question of his ability and his entire fitness to hold the highest political office within the gift of the people would not enter into the voter's consideration at all: he simply would not vote for a man of an alien race—Ethiopian, Mongol, Malaysian, or any other. The Americanization of the aspirant might not be doubted after his ancestors had lived in this country for several generations, and he might have peculiar and extraordinary fitness for the highest office of the land; but that office would not be within his reach. We lovers of high-sounding phrases and of Constitutional enactments capable of changing the course of nature will continue to follow Kipling's advice: 'A man should, whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race, and breed.'

"Which Caucasian among us is willing to be sent to a hospital to be cared for by negro physicians? None! Nor do I know of any white man who would send his wife, daughter, sister, or sweetheart to such an institution, to be subject to the medical attention of black men. A camel may go hopping and skipping through the eye of a needle more easily than a black man can become an interne in any hospital in America that admits white patients for treatment. Moreover, even the scientific Jew, great among physicians, is discriminated against by hospitals that are dominated by Christian trustees.

"The white man does not confine his prejudices to race. He looks with suspicion upon the members of his own race who differ with him in religious creed, in politics—in any opinion. The Roman Catholics have their parochial schools, hospitals, orphan asylums, and even universities. So have the Episcopalians, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the

Baptists, and nearly all the other large communions. So have the Jews. If some association of a few members—say some war veterans' post—comprises persons of varied political and religious beliefs, the officers of the association are elected by the holders of the particular religious creed or political faith that are numerically in the majority. In all things, according to general practice and belief, the man of our particular church communion, or political party, is more capable and, by far, more moral than is the man of some other affiliation. Our brother alone is to be intrusted with office. This is all natural enough; nor is there anything reprehensible in a man's clinging to his own 'caste, race, and breed.'

"In this country religious denominations are so numerous that they act as a check upon one another. One may be certain that if fifty-one per cent of the voters were Methodists, none other than a Methodist would hold elective office. In office, too, the official would be ruthless in his treatment of those of a different religious faith.

"Protestants are given to asserting that if the majority of the American people were to become Catholics the minority would be put to death. I wonder! If right, I solemnly affirm that if fifty-one per cent of the population should become Hardshells they would put all the Catholics to death. I should not be surprised, either, if the Methodists, or any one of the other Protestant denominations comprising fifty-one per cent of the American people, were to kill off all other Protestants whom they would fail to convert to Methodism, or what not. Catholics and Protestants seem to be made of like flesh and blood; they are alike in their intolerance.

"*Tolerance* is a word much overworked. Nobody is tolerant. To be tolerant, too—always tolerant—would be productive of more harm than good. The man who thinks he is

tolerant is usually some worthless wretch, without any opinion of his own, and of the mentality of a natural. The man of strong opinions and prejudices who is intolerant is the man of achievement, and upon his shoulders rests our civilization.

"Men being prejudiced, as they are, the greatest mind and the most inferior—and the Catholics in this country being about twenty per cent of the population and the Jews less than five per cent, with the rest of the population clamoring for the extinction of Catholic and Jew—I safely affirm that I shall never live to see either a Catholic or a Jew become President of this Protestant nation."

"Benjamin Disraeli was twice premier of England," I interposed.

"Ah," Bierce retorted; "an appointive office!"

"But," I returned; "based upon an election."

Nevertheless, he saw an essential difference, and said that he did not believe that Disraeli could have been elected by the direct vote of the people to even the office of justice of the peace. Besides, the English people were not so heterogeneous as the American—nor so heterodox, for that matter. The strength of the Jews in England and their slight freedom from persecution in recent decades were due in part to their patriotism, in part to the use of their great wealth in the interests of the State, and, to a far greater degree, to the adherence of the vast majority of the English people to their established Protestant church. The Established Church could not be endangered by England's few Jews, nor could English political institutions. "The Jew in America is subjected to petty persecutions, and there is a strong prejudice against him—enough ordinarily to keep him out of an elective office—but numerically he is too weak to give Christian Americans any real concern.

“So, I affirm, I shall not live to see the day when either a Jew or a Catholic is made President of the United States—much as I should like to have my Catholic and Protestant friends confounded by the election of a Jew and my Protestant friends discomfited by the election of a Catholic.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE RACONTEUR

I

ALTHOUGH a brilliant conversationalist, Bierce was but a poor raconteur. Perhaps he gave no consideration to the matter, whether he was or not; but the fact remains that he was not good at telling a story orally. Nor was he ordinarily quick at oral repartee. Yet, as everybody knows who is familiar with his published epigrams and aphorisms, his *doubles ententes* and his biting irony, as a writer of wit and humor he had but few if any peers. Since I would have aroused him to indignation if I had asked him to explain why a brilliant writer did not always (nor even frequently) shine in oral retort (he would have seen "the nigger in the woodpile"), I never got his explanation, nor did I ever hear him discuss the matter. I have known him to be brilliant at repartee, but not frequently, and I have observed many instances when he neglected his opportunities. At times he would curse himself for his "staircase wit," a term that he frequently used, preferring the English form to the French equivalent.

His stock of "brief stories" was not large, and he so frequently turned it over as to wear it to tatters. Nor were these little *contes* when first told particularly good. Not many, however, were *risqué*, and none was smutty. I will relate a few.

II

The story that follows was told by Bierce with pretended reluctance, after much urging by the ladies, particularly

when he was in a mixed gathering in "polite" society. As he worked up to the *dénouement*, he did so hesitatingly, purposely so, as if feeling for a word or a phrase in avoidance of an inelegant term. This story always brought down the house, the ladies being especially exuberant, as if to adulterate indelicacy with laughter:

Not so many years ago, a clergyman and his wife and their little children resided along the outskirts of a village, the name of which I will suppress, since it is not necessary to this narration, and for the further reason that Mrs. Blank is still alive; besides, I have no wish to confer undeserved fame on so humble a community. Well, this was a devoted little family, and the good wife lavished upon her fond husband all the uxorious attention so uncommon in connubial relationship.

As the Rev. Mr. Blank was about to depart from the parsonage for the market (he daily relieved the faithful housewife of these irksome details of domesticity), his spouse said:

"Now, Mr. Blank, please don't forget I am making sausages. Bring home with you a plenty of those ——"

Er-er-er—ah,—shall I say!——not to repeat the good woman's exact words, the tubular article that, when stretched and cured, might be used for diplomas—though inappropriate, for few students really possess within their interior the particular article to which I refer. To continue:

"You know, Mr. Blank, the sausage-meat is all ready, and I must have the cases this afternoon. Please tell the butcher to send them over by his boy."

Unfortunately, after the Rev. Mr. Blank had gone to the butcher's and had left the order in accordance with his wife's wishes, he met with a mortal mischance. As he was going over a railway-crossing, he was struck by a train, and his remains were widely scattered—a leg here, an arm there, while his head rolled down an embankment. In fact, he was pretty thoroughly shattered and scattered. Neighbors lovingly gathered up the different parts; and, not waiting until all the dissevered members had been brought together, they took them home to the poor widow one at

a time, or a few in a basket, and tenderly assembled them as nearly as possible in their original physiological conjunction.

Finally arrived the butcher's boy, who had not heard of the disaster, carrying a large market-basket. This he laboriously placed upon the kitchen table and pantingly announced:

"Here, Mrs. Blank; them's the Parson's . . . guts!"

III

Of course Ambrose Bierce counted physicians generally as being ignorant fellows, quacks, and gold-diggers. The late Dr. William Osler, formerly a professor at Johns Hopkins Hospital, and later knighted by his British sovereign, aroused Bierce's ire when he was said to have declared that everybody should be chloroformed until dead upon reaching the age of sixty. That Bierce bore the good man no grudge, however, is shown by this anecdote:

One day when Dr. Osler was in London he was invited to inspect a rather famous hospital of the old town; and there he was proudly shown about by several physicians and surgeons. Finally the charts (or whatever the nomenclature of the records of diagnosis may be) were reached. He looked them over carefully, observed the system of therapeutical abbreviations, such as D for diphtheria, DT for delirium tremens, SF for scarlet fever, TB for tuberculosis, and so on. All the diseases seemed to be pretty well under control except one, showing the condition of London to be healthy. The one appalling malady was indicated by the symbol GOK. Now, the famous doctor did not wish to display his ignorance, although he might have been pardoned for not being entirely *au courant* with the terminology of London hospitals.

"I observe," said he, "that you have a sweeping epidemic of GOK on your hands. By the way, this is symbol not in common use in American medical circles; just what is GOK?"

"Oh!" one of his hosts lightly replied; "when *we* can't diagnose, *God Only Knows*."

IV

This story was told by Ambrose Bierce to illustrate the extremes and the absurdities of memory teachers, or "professors of mnemonics," as he elected to call them:

When, once upon a time, a mnemonic pupil went to a chemist (note that I will not debase an honored profession by implying that its members are addicted to drugs) to purchase a certain remedy, but had forgotten the name of the article that accounted for his presence at the pharmacist's. After a long silence, during which the apothecary patiently waited, the customer, with seeming irrelevancy, asked:

"Can you name offhand the five Great Lakes?"

Amazed, the man of pills and potions declared that he could.

"Let me see you try," said the student doubtfully.

"Willingly," assented the proprietor: "Michigan, Superior, Huron, Erie ——"

"Stop! Hold!" came an interruption; "I have it! I have it! I have it! —Erie!—Lake Erie! Wasn't a great battle once fought on that lake?"

"Yes," was the astonished answer, "a very great battle, in which the American fleet was successful."

"And wasn't there a small body of water near the lake, connected by a tributary, or something of that sort?"

"Yes, there was; a deep but small bay."

"And didn't the successful commander put into that bay once —Ah, yes, that's the name: *put in* — Putin Bay! And what was the name of the American commander who put into Putin Bay?"

"Why," replied the apothecary with increasing surprise, "Commodore Perry."

"That's it!—Please give me five cents worth of Perry —— paregoric!"

V

If (when no ladies were present) one were so unwise as to refer to a girl as having been "ruined," as that term is

generally used, Ambrose Bierce would immediately tell the story that follows. This was in order to show that a girl's pecuniary fortune may be made and her greatest happiness achieved (not her ruination brought about) by male assistance. Frequently, at the risk of building for himself a reputation not even second to Lothario's, Bierce would represent himself as being a participant in an intrigue. He thought this usually gave force and verisimilitude to a tale. Here is the story:

Back in the bleak December of naughty-six, the 13th day of that month, when I occupied Room 13, Floor 13, Hotel N—(no, I shall not advertise the hostelry and illumine it with the glory of this narration), I was loitering near the entrance of the Metropolitan Opera House, vacantly following the audience with my eyes as it passed out, when my attention was arrested by a figure that seemed to me strangely familiar. The form was that of an elegantly-attired young woman, who was about to step into a superb limousine. She was enveloped in a Russian sable *sortie-du-bal* that left nothing exposed but her tiny slippered feet and her pretty head, the dimpled chin of which was coyly tucked into the carressing softness of the fur. On her head gloriously blazed an imperial tiara of sapphires and diamonds. As these considerations flashed upon my half-conscious mind, her eyes met mine, and she drew back from the open door of the limousine she was about to enter.

"Faith—an' if 't isn't Mr. Bierce!" she cried joyously.

Full recognition now came to me.

"God bless my soul, if it isn't Maggie!—Maggie! Why, my child, I thought you were still at the Olympia, in Washington! You *were* there, you know, making up my room a year or so ago. How comes all the wealth?"

"Begorra, Mr. Bierce!" she explained; "an' didn't yez hear as how Oi've been ruint?"

VI

"Sam Davis and Ambrose Bierce met in the barroom of

the Navarre, in New York, early one evening. They had not seen each other for some years. Let Bierce tell the story:

Of course drinks were in order, and a friendly controversy arose between us as to who should stand treat, each protesting that he should do so; and so we wrangled until we were too thirsty to keep on any longer.

"See here," said Sam, "let's flip a coin?" We did, and Sam won the toss.

"Now," said I, "what will you have?"

When the time of reckoning came, I suggested, in an offhand manner: "You pay, I believe, Sam?"

"Not so!" he retorted; "I won the toss."

"Yes; and you pay," I reaffirmed.

"How's that?" asked Sam with a great oath. (Sam's rough Western ways were confined to his speech mostly.)

"Do you take me for a damned maverick?"

"We-e-ell," I returned; "why did we flip the coin?"

"To see who was to pay for the drinks," Sam replied.

"E-x-a-c-t-l-y! We were fighting to decide who should have the *privilege* of paying for the drinks, and *you won*."

VII

Bierce used to contend (and he made out a perfect case) that the most immoral of men could write as if he were an angel. "Never," he would say, "appraise the products of a man's pen as you would the man himself. Useless to deny that Milton was a great moral teacher and that he might have written a homily against wife-beaters merely because he himself beat his wife. A man's precept is not weakened by his own violation of it in practice. To point this argument, let me relate an occurrence that took place on a London dock when I was present, late one night:

The surroundings were thoroughly bad; the atmosphere outstank Cologne; a few drunks were wallowing in their own vomit, sprawled out, while a few others clutched at any available *point d'appui*, in vain attempts to re-establish equilibrium. A sublimated young woman, full of the

glory of God, on reform bent, made her way down the dock with an assortment of tracts condemning bibulous habits under her arm, for free distribution. In her course of salvation, approaching a bedraggled sot, who reeled gallantly toward her—his demeanor, however, most respectful—she said:

"My poor man! Have one of our leaflets!" At the same time she humanely extended one. His bleared eyes looked at the paper and a gleam almost of intelligence lit his face as he beheld the title:

"Sh—sh—No, marm—sh, no!" he said. "Thanksh, sh—all the shame, marm-sh!—But I won't read it; I w-r-r-rote it!"

VIII

Several of Ambrose Bierce's cronies, including myself, were assembled one afternoon in the Coffin Room of the Raleigh hostelry, in Washington, where we were wont to foregather, when the subject turned to prenatal influences.

Bierce preferred this small subterranean room (which had no means of ventilation other than a single aperture that a door never closed) to others more nearly adjacent to the bar. One went down a flight of stairs, dimly lighted, in order to reach this room, as if going down, down, down—down into an underground tomb. The entrance was just sufficiently large to admit one's body. The mural decorations had been done with rare artistry, illustrative of the more lugubrious quatrains of Omar Khayyám's *Rubâiyât*, excerpts from which were written under the murals. Perhaps I should add that the sobriquet Coffin Room was conferred upon that reminder of the abode of the dead for the reason that, unintentionally, the architect had left on his hands a bit of unutilized space, the shape of a coffin. The room is no longer existent, having been a part of the older building before it was remodeled.

But, to return to prenatalism, the subject under discus-

sion that called forth this story, related by Bierce as follows:

Some of you may be aware (I myself am more than half convinced, despite the assertions of sophomoric physicians to the contrary) that human offspring are affected both physically and mentally by great emotional stress suffered by a mother before her child's birth. I did my theory to a turn, I think, in my story entitled *The Eyes of the Panther*; but that theory had a severe jolt a few days ago, I'll admit. It was this way:

As I was walking out Fourteenth Street, on my way to my tenement, I paused (in fact, stopped) as I saw two young negro men collide. One was as black as Cerebus, and one had red hair, blue eyes, pallid cheeks, yet was unmistakably of African descent, and classified in Washington as a negro. Said Cerebus:

"Hello, nigger; who's yo' shovin'?"

"'Nigger'? Who's yo' callin' 'nigger,' black man? I'se no nigger; I'se a w'ite man, I is," was Albus' resentful come-back.

"Hunh!" grunted the other; "'w'ite man!' So youse a w'ite man? Den whar'd yo' git dat flat nose? Whar'd yo' git dem rollin' lips? Whar'd yo' git dat nigger talk! Hunh! No, you' ain' no nigger, yo' ain'!"

The dapper Mr. Albus drew himself up haughtily, reclined on his slender cane, and slowly drawled:

"W'y, yo' see, it's disher way: ma mudder, befo' I was borned, was a-walkin' troo de woods late one night, gwine home, w'en a big black man jumped out of de bushes an' chased 'er. Yaas, saah; he done chased 'er, an' chased 'er, an' chased 'er, an' chased 'er, an' —"

"Ya-a-a-s; an' I see he done cotched 'er, too!"

IX

Fakers amused Ambrose Bierce. The out-and-out rascality of the mountebank and charlatan he held to be too apparent to deserve serious consideration; besides, the fool victims usually set forth to victimize the other rogue, and so deserved their punishment. Particularly medical quacks

supplied material for many of his witticisms and amplified his stock of anecdotes. Here is one:

My friend Percival Pollard, who hasn't a strand of hair on the top of his head (by the way, he is extremely sensitive about this condition!), confessed to me that he once went secretly to a beauty specialist whose famous hair tonic was represented to have such efficacy that it would grow hair on a bat. He told Pollard that, for five dollars, he would supply him with a luxuriant hirsute covering just above his brain.

For thirty days Pollard applied the lotion in accordance with instructions, and at the end of that time was unable to discover a single spier of hair. Moreover, he had, with alarm, observed the gradual growth and expansion of two opposite mounds developing on either side of his cranium, in much the position that horns occupy on the head of the Prince of Darkness. Pollard *is* a devil of a fellow, and I told him, when he sought my advice, that his alarm was well founded, and that if he did not look out he would soon acquire, as well, the javelin-like caudal appendage that trails behind the cloven hoofs. Together he and I sought out the purveyor to seekers of human pulchritude, to whom Pollard indignantly exposed his bald head, with its budding and rounded projections.

Truly, the faker was startled. Then he fell to stroking his vandyke thoughtfully. Suddenly a radiance filled his eyes.

"Why!" he exclaimed; "I see it all now! Entirely my mistake, sir; I gave you the wrong tonic! You have applied to your head my infallible bust-developer!"

Whatever fame Ambrose Bierce won as a raconteur was achieved by such stories as those I have repeated, as nearly in his own language as I can recall, and by practice he should have perfected them in the telling. I will, however, say this for Bierce the raconteur: his recitals always had verisimilitude—seemed Truth herself. Furthermore, they were usually infused with his own personality and that striking

vitality that I have described elsewhere in this volume. Nevertheless, he was not a first-class oral story-teller.

X

Bierce was never playful in his personal contacts—not in the ordinary manner of playfulness, as that of a young human animal, for example. He never romped. Always he was in deadly earnest, or gave that impression, even when he spoke with apparent jocularly. Indeed, many of his enemies were made for the reason that they were not aware that he had meant to be merely jocular when his shafts of wit were directed at them. He had not always intended to be offensive. I doubt if he was ever playful, even when a child.

If men ever achieve happiness, perhaps the sum of Bierce's life might be set down as happy, mayhap more so than that of the common run of mankind; yet, in that life there seemed to be no joyousness, such as one might expect to find at times in every normal human creature. He always took himself seriously. No mirth; unless a "smile" of a kind peculiar to himself—sardonic, macabre, which would cause the onlooker to shiver slightly—might indicate a type of mirth. Please bear in mind that I am not referring to his smiles (I never heard the sound of laughter from his lips in all the years of our association!) of tenderness, of love, but those that might seem to reflect merriment.

Perhaps the impression prevails in some quarters that Bierce in his converse was loquacious. Such was not the case. He never attempted to dominate any gathering. If (at times) he took a greater part in conversation than did anybody else in the assemblage, it was because questions were fired at him and consequently he was drawn into discussions more than others were.

XI

In a brief anecdote, or joke, Bierce thought the highest

order of wit embraced incongruity brought about by double action; or by a gatling gun—if human wit could range so far as to concentrate the firing of so many missiles on a single point.

One evening when a few of us had gathered together in his name, a young girl got off one of Joe Miller's stalest. This causing general laughter at her expense, Bierce came to her defense:

"Joe Miller," said he, "got together some of the cleverest jokes of the kind ever compiled, and while I disesteem mere humor, I read them over time and again. Some are witty—one is perennially good. Listen: 'It is not true that married men live longer than single; it only seems longer'."

That type of joke would sometimes appeal to Bierce.

Commenting upon witticisms and what approached perfection in wit, he credited his old enemy Mark Twain with one of the best specimens, so often repeated, when Twain telegraphed in denial of his rumored death that the report had been grossly exaggerated.

XII

Before closing this account of Bierce the raconteur, I will refer to his attitude toward the type of brief story—now under discussion—as to whether its interest is heightened by the introduction of the *risqué*. Some go so far as to say that there is no good smoking-room story that is not at least tinged with off-color; or, in its absence, trowelled with muck. It was Bierce's deliberate opinion that neither property increased the interest of an anecdote that otherwise had sufficient wit, or humor, or both, to make worth while its recital.

"Pretty poor is the story," he would say, "that has to be helped along by any crutch that could not be taken into a decent drawing-room."

CHAPTER XVII

SCHEFFAUER AND BIERCE

I

IN my judgment, Herman George Scheffauer was the greatest author among Bierce's close personal associates; the person among them of the broadest culture; mayhap he was the finest spirit of them all. In prose, in verse, in poetry, he was the greatest. Nor was he one of Bierce's literary creations. He was born great. And if he achieved still further greatness after his birth, Bierce was but one of many others who contributed toward his evolution. Nevertheless, Scheffauer evaluated highly Bierce's influence on him the man, on his outlook, and on his literary craftsmanship. No doubt the influence in all these respects was dynamic; but it was hardly equal to Scheffauer's estimate. At any rate, Scheffauer's expressions of gratitude to Bierce were unbounded, sincere, and of a character that should have impressed Bierce more than they did, being compliments without flattery, by a pupil who knew his master's work and who also knew that he had fashioned a few jewels equal to his master's best. Yet Scheffauer was no more a student of Bierce than he was of other great masters, and, aside from personal contact and the vast influence of the spoken word, I doubt if Scheffauer gained more from Bierce than he did from any one of a score or more of other great literary geniuses of ancient and modern periods.

II

Scheffauer, fine spirit though he was, used to give his spiritual being frequent holidays. The debauchery was

frightful. At such times—and they were frequent enough—his friends and acquaintances among men would abandon him in disgust. He committed no crime, so far as I am aware, nor any act that strictly might be said to have involved moral turpitude; but he simply did not know the code of gentlemen and that of men of lesser rank, and *noblesse oblige* seemed not to be in his vocabulary. All men with whom he was brought into contact found him offensive sooner or later, I should say, and ordinarily this was due to some outrageous conduct on his part toward a friend or an acquaintance common to both. One felt that Scheffauer would turn against him behind his back, without cause, then, insidiously, diabolically, try to erect a barrier between friend and friend, acquaintance and acquaintance. Publishers particularly were wary of him. They did not care to have him about; they knew he would try to bring about a feeling of hostility between them and their authors.

The final break between Bierce and Scheffauer—which occurred in 1908, if my memory serves me right—was brought about by Scheffauer soon after a patched-up reconciliation had been effected between them. I give the cause, although there were many antecedent difficulties, no doubt:

For some time—perhaps for several years—Scheffauer had been trying to effect the publication of a volume of his poems, later issued (in 1908) by The Neale Publishing Company. He had been unable to find a publisher. In despair, he called on Bierce for help, and Bierce immediately took the matter up with me, and upon his recommendation The Neale Publishing Company entered into a contract with Scheffauer, under the terms of which *Looms of Life* was issued entirely at the expense of the publishers, with a royalty of twenty per cent payable to the author. Bierce had told Scheffauer that, although his (Bierce's) relations with publishers generally were those of author and publisher

only, that I was his friend, that I had always accepted without question his literary judgment, that I, frequently without reading the manuscripts that he recommended to me for publication, had accepted every one, and had effected publication at the expense of the publishers, with a royalty payable to the author that was never less than twenty per cent. All this was true. I could not have employed a reader more competent than Bierce, more honest, nor any in whose judgment I could have had greater confidence. His kind offices were freely given to me and to the authors. Every manuscript that he recommended to me for publication was issued by the Neale house under terms approved by both himself and the author, always at the expense of the publishers, no matter how slight the prospect of salability to a profitable degree of the projected book.

Yet, after the contract providing for the publication of *Looms of Life* was made, and while Scheffauer was in the East, having come on from California to see various publishers, he called to see me, bearing a letter of introduction from Bierce. After expressing his gratitude to my friend for having procured a publisher for him, gradually and insidiously he tried to set me against my leading author, his friend and mine. He attacked Bierce as being without a formal education, asserted that his literary work suffered in consequence, and finally so aroused me to indignation that I ordered him out of my office. Later Bierce learned that Scheffauer had gone to other publishers in New York and apparently had endeavored to prejudice them against him. This information, having been conveyed to him by several persons, he asked me if Scheffauer had spoken to me in the same manner, and I then reported the substance of the interview as related here.

Bierce wished his intimates to be under no misapprehension concerning the quarrel, so wrote letters to Scheffauer,

copies of which he made, handing a set to me, a set to Sterling, and probably distributing several others. It is interesting to note that Bierce lied to Scheffauer, saying that I did not know that he felt the slightest resentment toward him, and that, so far as I knew, or was likely to know (unless Scheffauer would have it otherwise), the two were the best of friends. Yet, he was sending out copies of his letters as soon as written, to me, to Sterling, to Carrie Christiansen, and perhaps to others. Excerpts are as follow:

The friends that warned you against the precarious nature of my friendship were right. To hold my regard one must fulfill hard conditions—hard if one is not what one should be; easy if one is. I have, indeed, a habit of calmly considering the character of a man with whom I have fallen into any intimacy and, whether I have any grievance against him or not, informing him by letter that I no longer desire his acquaintance. This I do after deciding that he is not truthful, candid, without deceit, and so forth—in brief, honorable. If anyone is conscious that he is not in all respects worthy of my friendship he would better not cultivate it, for assuredly no one can long conceal his true character from an observant student of it. Yes, my friendship is a precarious possession. It grows more so the longer I live, and the less I feel the need of a multitude of friends.

So, if in your heart you are conscious of being any of the things which you accuse *me* of being, or anything else equally objectionable (to *me*) I can only advise you to drop me before I drop you.

Certainly you have an undoubted right to your opinion of my ability, my attainments and my standing. If you choose to publish a censorious judgment of these matters, do so by all means: I don't think I ever cared a cent for what was printed about me, except as it supplied me with volcanic material for my pen. One may presumably have a "sense of duty to the public," and the like. But convincing one person (one at a time) of one's friend's deficiencies is hardly worth while, and is to be judged differently. It comes under another rule

Maybe, as you say, my work lacks "soul," but my life does not, as a man's life is the man. Personally, I hold that sentiment has a place in this world, and that loyalty to a friend is not inferior as a characteristic to correctness of literary judgment. If there is a heaven I think it is more valued there. If Mr. Neale (your publisher as well as mine) had considered you a Homer, a Goethe or a Shakespeare a team of horses could not have drawn from *me* the expression of a lower estimate. And let me tell you that if you are going through life as a mere thinking machine, ignoring the generous promptings of the heart, sacrificing it to the brain, you will have a hard row to hoe, and the outcome, when you survey it from the vantage ground of age, will not please you. You seem to me to be beginning rather badly, as regards both your fortune and your peace of mind.

I saw Neale every day while in New York, and he does not know that I feel the slightest resentment toward you nor do I know it myself. So far as he knows, or is likely to know (unless you will have it otherwise) you and I are the best of friends or rather, I am the best of friends to you. And I guess that is so. I could no more hate you for your disposition and character than I could for your hump, if you had one. You are as Nature has made you, and your defects, whether they are great or small, are your misfortunes. I would remove them if I could, but I know that I cannot, for one of them is inability to discern the others, even when they are pointed out.

I must commend your ardor in one thing. You confirm Neale's words in saying that you commented on "my seeming lack of sympathy with certain modern masters," which you attribute to my not having read them. That is a conclusion to which a low order of mind in sympathy with the "modern masters" naturally jumps, but is hardly worthy of a man of your brains. It is like your former lofty assumption that I had not read some ten or twelve philosophers, naming them, nearly all of whom I had read, and laughed at, before you were born. In fact, one of your most conspicuous characteristics is the assumption that what a man who does not care to "talk shop" does not speak of, and vaunt

his knowledge of, he does not know. I once thought this a boyish fault, but you are no longer a boy. Your "modern masters" are Ibsen and Shaw, with both of whose works and ways I am thoroughly familiar, and both of whom I think very small men—pets of the drawing-room and gods of the hour. No, I am not an "up to date" critic, thank God! I am not a literary critic at all, and never, or very seldom, have gone into that field except in pursuance of a personal object—to help a good writer (who is commonly a friend)—maybe you can recall such instances—or laugh at a fool. Surely you do not consider my work in the *Cosmopolitan* (mere badinage and chaff, the only kind of stuff that the magazines wants from me, or will print) essays and criticism. It has never occurred to me to look upon myself as a literary critic; if you *must* prick my bubble please to observe that it contains more of your breath than of mine. Yet you have sometimes seemed to value, I thought, some of my notions about even poetry . . .

Perhaps I am unfortunate in the matter of keeping friends; I know, and have abundant reason to know, that you are at least equally luckless in the matter of making them. I could put my finger on the very qualities in you that make you so, and the best service I could do you would be to point them out and take the consequences. That is to say, it would serve you many years hence; at present you are like Carlyle's "Mankind"; you "refuse to be served." You only consent to be enraged.

I bear you no ill will, shall watch your career in letters with friendly solicitude—have, in fact, just sent to the . . . a most appreciative paragraph about your book, which may or may not commend itself to the editors; most of what I write does not. I hope to do a little, now and then, to further your success in letters. I wish you were different (and that it the harshest criticism that I ever uttered of you except to yourself) and wish it for your sake more than for mine. I am older than you and probably more "acquainted with grief"—the grief of disappointment and disillusion. If in the future you are convinced that you have become different, and I am still living, my welcoming hand awaits you. And when I forgive I forgive all over, even the new offense.

The foregoing example of Scheffauer's relations with men is typical. His literary career was damaged, retarded, made almost impossible because of the nature of the man himself.

Not so his contacts with women. He strongly attracted women of exceptional mentality and culture, in every sense fine, and held them to the end of his life. In him they encountered no disloyalty, but steadfastness and spirituality. With them it was love at first sight. No wonder! Physically superb; with a face chiseled as by Praxiteles—a face in which shone a rare soul, yet without effeminacy—his bearing that of power, dignity, and tranquillity; that was the personality that appeared before the ladies. While in his presence they could see nobody else. This was the Herman Scheffauer that men saw, too—usually. But there was another Herman Scheffauer—the perverse creature, in ugly mood, with a face of surly gloom, at times distorted by evil passions, ready to take out upon his best friends his grievance against God—and that was the Herman Scheffauer also seen by men.

“Perversity,” so Edgar Allan Poe would have described the unlovely moods and acts of Herman Scheffauer. That his affection for Bierce was very real, I do not doubt; and if Scheffauer and Bierce had never been in personal contact, their admiration would have been mutual and undisturbed. As it was, men of discernment with whom Scheffauer was in personal relations, meeting face to face frequently, must have recognized in him a fine spirit—but one difficult (at times) to tolerate.

In his perverseness, he thrust his poisoned steel into Bierce where he could wound him deepest. So he well knew. Bierce *had* no “formal education” and no college diploma—nor had Scheffauer; but there was this difference: Scheffauer cared for neither; he knew both to be valueless; he knew that he and Bierce had the only kind of education obtainable; but Bierce feared the man armed with the weapon

unknown to him—the college diploma, conferred as the result of a formal education. Deep was the thrust of the blade!

I met Scheffauer a number of times after I drove him from my office. Some sort of truce had been patched up between us; but none between Scheffauer and Bierce. Several times, later, I attended dinners, some formal and others informal, at which Bierce and Scheffauer were among the guests. A deep resentment was smouldering in Bierce, the result of numerous injuries that he had received at Scheffauer's hands, and the final flame burst forth when Scheffauer accused Bierce of the very thing that he himself had done: he said that Bierce had tried to damage him among publishers, and particularly with the publisher he had recently acquired, meaning myself. This charge was wholly untrue. I am certain that Bierce never sought to injure Scheffauer in any way. That he never did him an injury, and that, despite their separation in anger, he never let pass an opportunity to promote his welfare, I am absolutely certain. In *The Collected Works*, completed some years after the final break, he gives the young poet unstinted praise.

The Scheffauer of dual personality was probably due to his early environment. Persons who were brought into contact with him during his childhood tell me that he was a gutter-rat. His ancestry could hardly have been humbler. But, withal, he was born with pride, and he soon acquired an exquisite sensitiveness, which caused him passionately to resent, for example, the mistaken kindness of those who gave their cast-off clothes to him—persons almost as lowly born as himself—while his poverty forced him to wear the tattered clothing. The humiliations of his boyhood sank deep into his sensitive spirit. The sidewalks of San Francisco seemingly are unlike those of New York. At any rate, the sewage carried off by the gutters from the sidewalks of

San Francisco was emptied into the soul of Herman Scheffauer; and if flowers sprang from the muck, yet the muck was left—to foul the spirit of a mighty poet.

III

Scheffauer informs us, in his article quoted in the next chapter, that he was sixteen, Bierce past fifty, when they first met. Yet, even so, Scheffauer was a writer of both prose and verse that was evoking the admiration of men of letters, including Bierce; and at that early age he was extensively read in the literature that counts—in the great literature of all ages. His literary precocity, if not unexampled, was certainly unusual. Furthermore, as I have said of others elsewhere in this book, Scheffauer was one of those rare souls who knew without learning. Truly, he was born great. When he and the subject of this biography first met face to face, master in fact and master in being looked into each other's eyes. When Scheffauer died, in 1927, when not yet fifty, there were but few writers worth the reading that he had not read, but few artists in any branch of art upon whose work he had not gazed, and his catholicity of information (and more than information) probably was unexcelled by any of his contemporaries. He was truly a cultured man, superficial in nothing, and with an insight into men and things—the gift of only the great among seers.

I have read nothing by Scheffauer that was not greatly written, no matter at what age he wrote, and I count him as one of the most finished of the stylists of the English tongue. Bierce's admiration of his prose and verse was no less than my own, he taking the keenest delight in dwelling in the temple of art so rarely wrought as was the one built of the words of the younger man. Each stone in that temple was perfectly placed by a master; and each stone was a

diamond. Bierce might have said that pearls also were to be found in the structure. If so, they came from the sea, not from a maiden's eyes. At times Scheffauer's pages *would* weep, and Bierce could tolerate some of the tears; but not those shed in anger over the sweating laborer, the raging anarchist, the cruel old world, although he was bound to admit that such words as these, taken from different poems, made poetry:

And the dome of the Capitol roars
With the shouts of the Caesars of crime.

The hidden Norms have woven hope
Through the murky woof of days.

The land lies blasted! All the hills are hearts
Of coals! His breath of poison rots the air.

But Bierce needed all the control he could exercise over himself in order to read without prejudice, calmly, as an unbiased critic, the lamentations of Scheffauer over the tares garnered by sinners. To Bierce the underworld, the down-trodden, the ignorant, the slothful—all such cattle—were sinners, and he had no tears with which to water their tares. Nor had he any for collective sinners—small communities, cities, nations. Jesus, wailing over Jerusalem, to him was a pitiful sight. "He might have spared His tears," "But the poets and the ladies will continue to take flowers (and tears) even to monsters in prison." And where the poet (he knew of one!) who had not wept over sinners? Yet, at times, he had felt inclined to weep over one body of sinners (those who weep)—but tears of wrath.

IV

Herman George Scheffauer, son of John George and Maria Theresa (Eisele) Scheffauer, was born in San Francisco, February 3, 1878. He married, in 1912, Ethel, daugh-

ter of William W. Talbot, of Yorkshire, England. Her mother's maiden name is unknown to me.

Since Scheffauer at sixteen had reached man's estate as an author when he came under the tutelage of Bierce, the master had a graduate student of technique to instruct—not to instruct in craftsmanship, but in the great temples of art to be constructed, by a workman who already knew his tools, his materials, and all the principles of literary architecture.

Not so in the case of George Sterling, who came to the master while still in the literary kindergarten, not yet with a primer in his hand; a man of years, an infant in letters, he patiently sought of the master instruction in the rudiments of English grammar. But of this "more anon," as the country editors say; I return to the Scheffauer mutton.

Graduate students are hard to teach. They are given to "sass," and Scheffauer was no docile pupil. To be sure, the evaluations of two great technicians ordinarily merge; but there were fundamentals of art upon which these two masters differed; and there were necessarily differences in outlook upon men and life. In part these divergencies—with the exception of those relating to the principles of art, which were few—were due to the youth of the younger man. Age and youth simply do not view life through the same eyes. It is a moot question, this, which has the better vision. But youth in time reaches old age, and during his process of decay, paradoxically, he grows in wisdom. The quarrel is an old one, endless, and its orbit a circle, around which the chattering squirrels chase one another.

These reflections lead me to wonder if Scheffauer did not take his own life for the reason that he found, when he reached the age of wisdom, that Bierce was right—that the world is hopelessly evil, not to be made over by poets, not to be reformed by fantasy. So far as I am aware, no

cause for his act of self-destruction has been discovered; and, knowing the man and his work as I have for many years, I think likely enough that he took leave of a world into which he had been born that was quite a different place from the Elysium of his imagination. But we shall cherish the Elysium of his creation for centuries yet to come, and there gather the asphodels and moly he has strewn.

Many were the disagreements of these two masters, one yet a pupil, on rather trivial matters. Scheffauer needlessly aroused to wrath the man for whom he had a deep affection by contending with him, while he was fully aware that Bierce neither could nor would tolerate an expression of difference of opinion by anybody on any subject, however trivial. I could relate any number of instances of needless disputes between them. One or two examples will suffice to show the basis of a controversy that would extend over some days, or even years.

Scheffauer, with the passion of youth—ah, youth can be so very young!—would declare Moore to be the greatest of the lover poets, “who understood that love is a sacrament,” that man reaches his highest spiritual attainment in the divine passion, that Moore could weave about Love the fancies of the gods and array Eros in a gossamer woven from the petals of roses. Bierce’s eyes would narrow the while, his body growing rigid, as if forcing himself to listen as a matter of duty imposed by courtesy until the rhapsody of the young man should melt into an ecstatic *retardando*. Then he would give vent to the expletive used by the last of the Old Guard at Waterloo. This he would follow up with a few expressions commonly heard at studs, concluding with the remark, “Those poems certainly make a gelding of me.” Nevertheless, Bierce thought Moore to be a great poet, and held him in higher esteem than is common among the critics of our time.

The subject of one quarrel that separated Bierce and Scheffauer for years was the relative military prowess of the French and the Germans. Bierce had always been fond of the French, and considered them the greatest fighters since the days of the Imperial Roman Guard, while Scheffauer held the French in contempt and believed that God had finished his masterpiece and had ceased creating human beings when He had fashioned the Teuton. Bierce contended that, despite the numerical inferiority of the French, they were greater fighters than the Germans, were the better versed in military art and science, and that in an offensive-defensive war with Germany, France was bound to win. The presumption on the part of both was that the two nations should be allowed to fight it out without outside interference. Scheffauer contended that the conquest of France by Germany would be swifter than when the Teutons seized that maiden in the Franco-Prussian war. Scheffauer would have hung on, perhaps with wrath smouldering, if his opponent had not driven him away—to stay away for years.

V

The sin of Scheffauer as an author was laziness. And so Bierce thought. To be sure, Scheffauer wrote a great deal; but much that he wrote could have been written by others, if not with his charm of style, at least with as much import. He was often too lazy to exercise his creative faculties, and would paint pictures with his pen that were photographic, painted with perfect technique, but devoid of any creative element, and lacking his fine fantasy. Yet, enough of his work at its best has been published to assure him a niche in the world's Temple of Letters.

A few words from *The Collected Works* will be sufficient to show Bierce's regard for Scheffauer the poet:¹

¹ From *The Collected Works*. Vol. XI, pp. 184-186.

In Herman Scheffauer's first book, *Of Both Worlds*, are two little poems of such naturalness, simplicity and beauty that I hardly know of anything better of their kind. My purpose in quoting them here is, partly, to bring them to the attention of those who may be unfamiliar with Mr. Scheffauer's work, but chiefly to suggest to the "dialect poets" that they undertake to give them an added charm by rewriting them in their own manner.

THE SLEEPERS

The winds lie hushed in the hill
 And the waves upon the seas;
 The birds are mute and still,
 Deep in their dreaming trees;
 The earth lies dumb in night,
 And the stars in their degrees
 Sleep with the suns in space,
 With angels, with seraphs bright,
 In the light of God His face.
 Softly lie the heads
 Of the sleepers in their beds;
 But the sleepers in the ground—
 They alone sleep sweet and sound,
 They alone know rest profound.
 Fear not—soon a rest as deep
 Comes to thee—thou, too, shalt sleep.

MISERERE

The last few prayers are done,
 The pall and shroud are spread;
 Seven tapers at thy feet
 And seven at thy head.
 Thy hands are crossed upon
 Thy bosom white where now
 Thy heart is stilled. O Death,
 How beautiful art thou!

VIII

A complete bibliography of the works of Scheffauer would be of interest to a great many persons. I have not attempted

to compile one, but here give a list of his works now to be found in the New York Public Library, as follows:

- Of Both Worlds (poems), 1903
Blood Money, Hamburg: Overseas Pub. Co., 1921
Debates and Differences, Amsterdam: 1919
A Duel Between two Americans, New York: 1915
Looms of Life (poems). New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1908
Sons of Baldar (forest play). San Francisco: The Bohemian Club, 1908
The Masque of the Elements. 1911
Drake in California: Ballads and Poems. London: A. C. Fifield, 1912
Atta Troll, From the German of Heinrich Heine, London: Sedgwick and Jackson, 1913
The Survey of the Woman Problem. From the German of Rose Meyreder. London: W. Heinemann, 1913
The German Prison House; How to Convert it into a Torture Chamber and a Charnel. Leipzig: T. Weicher.
The Hollow Head of Mars: A Modern Masque in Four Phases. London: Simpkin, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1915
Das Land Gottes. Hannover: P. Steigmann, 1923
Gas. A Play in Five Acts, from the German of George Kaiser, London, Chapman and Dodd, Ltd., 1924
The New Vision in the German Arts. New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1924
Peter the Czar. From the German of Alfred Henschke. New York: Putnam's, 1925
Das Geistige Amerika von Heute. Berling: Ullstein, 1925
Bashan and I, by Thomas Mann. Translated by Herman Scheffauer. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1923
Wenn ich ein Deutscher War. Leipzig: E. Koch, 1925

CHAPTER XVIII

SCHEFFAUER ON BIERCE

I

HERMAN GEORGE SCHEFFAUER wrote of Bierce from time to time for a period extending from 1895, approximately, to the day of the younger man's death, in 1927. His articles on his old master were published in magazines in America and in various European countries. In addition, he referred to Bierce in books and in articles in which that author was introduced only incidentally, and in all he published that I have read his references to his old literary preceptor were couched in affectionate terms. Not so his oral allusions. So far as his letters are concerned, I have never known of an instance in which he referred to Bierce in uncomplimentary terms, and I rather take it that his outbursts of vilification were limited to the exercise of his vocal cords. But they were severely strained. Usually the two gentlemen were not on speaking terms, the lapses in friendship continuing for a number of consecutive years; and it was during such periods that pretty much all that Scheffauer published on Bierce was written.

Absence seems to have made the heart grow fond. And this I do not say with levity: Scheffauer was deeply fond of Bierce, blackguard him though he did when speaking of him, and it must have been to him a source of constant regret that they were not always on friendly terms. Their quarrels were due purely to clashes of widely differing personalities. They loved each other at a distance; they could not tolerate each other face to face. If Scheffauer were deeply fond of Bierce, I here affirm that Bierce's esteem for

Scheffauer (hardly a stronger regard) was not lessened by their endless wrangles. If the one is in Heaven, the other, I hope, has found an equally congenial abode—and Bierce used to say his preference was Hell—that the harmony of other spirits may not be disturbed.

Limitations of space prevent my quoting at length from more than one or two of the numerous published accounts of Bierce that have issued from Scheffauer's pen. So I include excerpts from only one or two of his articles. There is still another paper, however, that seems to me to be of exceptional value as a critique on satire and satirists generally. That article I have been unable to find. It was published in one of the leading American magazines, probably in 1910, and I seem to recall the title as being *The Last of the Satirists*—Bierce being the last. I do not find mention of the article in any bibliography of Scheffauer's work. Still another article on the satirists by Scheffauer was published in *The Living Age*, July 12, 1913, on this side of the water, and the same article appeared in *The Fortnightly Review*, No. DLIII (I have not the date), on the other side, the title of this paper being *The Death of Satire*, in which Bierce looms as the last of the great satirists. I yield to the temptation to quote briefly from that paper as published in the *Fortnightly*, as follows:

There is now little warrant for still classing Lowell as the foremost American satirist, though his work is certainly best known. Judged by the sharpest, most classic standards, the superiority of a comparatively obscure Western satirist, Ambrose Bierce, in substance, strength and style, becomes plain. Unlike Lowell, he is, however, under the disadvantage of never having devoted his splendid powers to any great movement of his time. The lover of satire at its best will find keen enjoyment and much surprise in such works of his as *Black Beetles in Amber* and *Shapes of Clay*

Lucilius denouncing the foolish or wicked by name, startled Horace. The modern satirist has usually accepted Pope's principle of "lashing the sin and sparing the sinner," a purely benevolent concept that Pope himself violated in his Grub Street epic [*The Dunciad*]. The American satirist, Ambrose Bierce, however, maintained that satire, to be effective and corrective, must be personal and concrete

Never before did the corrupted limbs of the American national body have greater need of satiric surgery . . . The voices of the prophets of doom are heard in the land, but the dragon-slayers sleep upon their swords, or, waking, toy with them in listless mood. Only one resolute voice, lifted in sorrow rather than in anger, has for years invoked the Goddess of Liberty whose sanctity is threatened.

I am unable to say just when Scheffauer wrote in English the paper entitled *Ambrose Bierce, An American Satirist*, which was probably intended for publication in America and in England. So far as I am aware, it has not been published in either of those countries nor in the English language; but a translation of it into the German was made by Dr. Wilhelm Söder, and publication effected in the German in 1926. I am indebted to Miss Lily Young Cohen for the turning back of the article into the English—the article as it was published in the German. Since she did not have access to Scheffauer's original script, the two English versions could hardly be identical. Why Scheffauer did not make the German translation himself, I am unable to say, for he was equally skilled in the use of the German and the English languages. From Dr. Söder's translation, which was published in the *Preussische Jahrbücher*, zweihundert-undfünfter Band, Juli bis September, 1926, I use excerpts as follows:

Shortly after the war the sad news, though of doubtful authenticity, reached me that the well-known American satirist and story-teller Ambrose Bierce had been shot in

Mexico by a detachment of Villa's insurgents. He had been counted dead since 1913. One of the most notable figures in American literature, he had many points of resemblance with Poe, Swift and Voltaire. I knew Ambrose Bierce well, and our friendship, which extended over many years, was very close.¹ The news of his supposed death under circumstances so tragic (which on account of the fatality in his own nature seemed to be ordained) touched me deeply, in spite of the many years that had elapsed since last I saw him, in spite of the great distance that had separated us, and in spite of the pile of ruins that the war had heaped up between us.

The mournful tidings from my home in the Far West of America came to me like the echo of the volley discharged at that dauntless heart and that noble head, and awakened in me many memories of our wonderful days in California. Once again before my mental vision there passed the hours of a rich literary association and an inspiring companionship. I found myself borne back in memory to the time of many an intimate exchanges of ideas and to scenes of many spontaneous compulsory partings.² For many of his friends Bierce had died a second, perhaps a third time.

Whether the news, which was brought to us from Mexico by a reporter, is true or not is of no great importance. I know that the tragic genius of this neglected and hardly known poet, so full of fantastic creativeness, will find welcome and honor in Germany. In no other country have so many editions of those great Americans, Poe, Emerson, and Whitman, appeared.

My friendship with Ambrose Bierce would seem to ignore Time, since I was only sixteen and he already more than fifty years old when first we came together. I had delivered myself of a little satirical paper on him, which seemed to please him so much that soon we grew to be fast friends, and shortly thereafter he became my literary Mentor. A feeling of gratitude, which overcomes self-deceit,

¹ Interrupted by frequent violent quarrels.—W. N.

² "Compulsory," but not in the sense that Scheffauer would imply. Bierce would compel him to take his departure,—as one of May Irwin's songs puts it: "Take your clothes, and go!"—W. N.

impels me to acknowledge how much I owe to him for the severe literary and mental discipline to which he subjected me. That old Spartan, over whom had burst a hundred storms of destiny, and who had been compelled to arm himself for many a strenuous combat, had become hardened by his experiences. He plunged me into an intellectual Styx which seemed to me to be veritable bath of steel. It not only fortified me against the threatening dangers of sentimentality and absurdity that repeatedly confront the young American writer, but it also placed me in the position where I refrained from adopting Bierce's own sarcastic, life-gain-saying philosophy.

Bierce's view of the world was that of tranquil and stoic pessimism, an inquisitive, half-humorous bitterness toward the drollery, the vulgarity, and the foolishness of life . . . Bierce was a misanthrope, therefore he was not a calcified cynic. People have called his imagination brutal. In his tales it afforded him pleasure to conjure up a merciless and devilish destiny for his puppets that entangled them in frightful dilemmas, and then to contemplate their writhings through the perspective of an art that had become objective to the point of inhumanity. But in spite of his inexorableness, Bierce had emotions; indeed, he was tormented by a cynical melancholy, a Wertherlike world-weariness, which sometimes prompted him to give his feelings expression in lyric form. Who would believe that these verses *To Nanine* were written by the same hand that penned that frightful war story, *Chickamauga*?³

Wir hörten jubilieren
 Ein Vöglein in der Nacht
 So schön könnt's musizieren
 Wie wir es nur gedacht.

³ "This poem is given in full in English on page 61 of this volume. Here it is repeated in Dr. Söder's translation in order to show how admirably this lyric, in common with nearly all of Bierce's metrical compositions, can be rendered in the German, practically without loss of any of the English flavor. In fact, this is equally true of Bierce's prose compositions, and is true of other languages than the German. Not only has he been translated in part (and the translations published) into the German, the French, the Italian, and the Scandanavian, but also into Esperanto, and in that synthetic language has been published on both sides of the Atlantic.—W. N.

Heut Morgen tönt hernieder
Sein Liedchen von dem Ast.
Doch etwas klingt nicht wieder
Was früher mich erfasst.

Die Lust und Liebe fehlt ihm,
Geschwunder ist sein Mut.
Nanine, Nanine, was quält ihn
Das er nicht singt so gut?

Nanine bleibt stumm verschwiegen,
Sie hört kein ird'schen Sang;
Die Vogel, die Sonne sie lügen—
Und die Nacht ist, ach, so lang!

I often visited Bierce at his country place at Wright in the Santa Clara Mountains, south of San Francisco. Here he led an easy, half-hermit's life. Here he penned his genial weekly talks, *Prattle*, for the San Francisco *Examiner*, and here he consumed the superb climate with his asthma. A human skull grinned scoffingly on his work table. He was convinced that the skull had originally been that of a woman—because the lower jawbone was lacking.

In his work Bierce juggled with thoughts on death. But this arose not so much from an innate morbid frame of mind as, to a greater degree, from a humorous estimate of life and an over-lively imagination, which left itself impelled to envelop itself in romantic gloom. Bierce stands in a close literary nexus with the world of Poe and the melancholy of a Byronic Manfredism.

Like any wholesome, upright man, Bierce concerned himself very little with meditations on perdition. Some of his writings in prose and in verse are really but the turning into another mould the familiar melancholy landscapes of Gustave Doré—"which make one feel as if something were going to happen."

His pessimistic evaluation of life was tempered with an Epicurean conduct of life and a sense of chivalry, and was further beautified and perfumed by many exaggerated acts of sacrifice, which he seemed to consider were exacted of him by the code of honor of a gentleman and soldier of the old school.

I hold with Scheffauer that Bierce's harsh concept of life was modified by a high sense of honor, according to his moral code, and with a fine sense of chivalry. In pecuniary matters, for example, he seemed to me to be impeccable. Furthermore, he affirmed, and I think with truth, that his friend's woman was inviolable at his hands, and that he practised in his relations with women, without deviation, the code common to gentlemen. To be sure, those laws have not been codified; but all gentlemen know them instinctively.

But I am unable to subscribe to Scheffauer's statement that Bierce's life "was further beautified and perfumed by many exaggerated acts of sacrifice," for I know of no sacrificial act of his life, if we except those of his military career. I think Scheffauer knew of none other. Just how far his military acts, too, could be said to have been motivated by a sense of sacrifice, if there were any such sense at all, nobody may say. War to him was an adventure, in which he deliberately risked his life; but if his life had been taken by the enemy, I should not apply to the situation the expression so glibly used these days, "He made the great sacrifice!" Nor would he have used any such expression. His wraith would probably have returned to the battlefield and have impatiently exclaimed to itself: "Here's where I made a damned fool of myself, taking an unnecessary risk, and not even giving myself the satisfaction of plugging the fellow on the other side!"

I simply cannot see Bierce engaged in any act of sacrifice. He was selfish, self-centered, and never given to self-abnegation, so far as I know. His acts of generosity, which were numerous, involved no sacrifice on his part. And he could be distinctly ungenerous, and was, time and again—ungenerous to his enemies, even to his friends, when his own comfort would not have been disturbed by generosity. He

was intolerant as well. With all his many fine qualities, I will not join with Scheffauer in his flight of oratory, attributing to Bierce a virtue that he certainly did not possess.

He had, during his short residence in England, acquired many English, one might even say Tory, externalities. He once said to me that his ideal of an elderly man was one with ruddy face and silver hair,—a color scheme that in time he came to realize in his own person. He was very fond of French cooking, and made regular pilgrimages from his home "Walhall"—so called in mockery of the names given by his neighbors to their estates—in order to pamper his appetite in San Francisco. Although he ordinarily lived temperately, he was an advocate of the generous use of alcohol and of the philosophy of the hedonist Persian poet Omar Khayyám,—long before Omar Khayyám became a cult in America. As a souvenir, he once gave me a handsome silver whiskey-flask. "It is a memento," he proudly said in his gentle, almost high voice, "of a girl who no longer lives—for me."

"Ordinarily lived temperately"—so he did, as I have held elsewhere in this volume. But there were long periods when he drank excessively. Even during such lapses, however, I doubt if he would have been counted a drunkard by his associates, for he usually "had his head" at least several hours of every twenty-four and during such lucid moments would turn out some of his great literature. Time and again he would drink to the point where he would have no recollection the next day of anything that had happened after he had reached a condition of inebriety. Less frequently he would drink until he would collapse and sink into unconsciousness. Sometimes he had to be conducted to his apartments, at others carried there in a condition of semi-consciousness, or unconsciousness. He told me that he had once had delirium tremens.

Not yet has anybody rounded out a definition of drunkenness that seems to have met with general acceptance. Bierce

would try his hand at a definition, but without satisfactory results, and finally he reached the conclusion that the boundaries of this no-man's-land were too faint to be distinguishable. He rather liked the definition compounded by the late Walter Juan Davis, that brilliant journalist who also wrote poetry good enough to be read aloud on Parnassus. Here's how Walter Juan, as he was affectionately known to his associates, put it:

When your heels hit hard and your head feels queer,
And your thoughts foam up like the froth on beer;
When your head is weak and your voice is strong
And you laugh like hell at some damn-fool song,
You're drunk—by gosh!—you're drunk.

Bierce had the talent of quickly and surely grasping the humorous content of a thing and then presenting it in perfect abridged form. One of the best epigrams in the English language sprang from his pen:

“How beautiful it would be if we might fall into the arms of women without falling into their hands.”

. . . . One of the many legends about Bierce that gained circulation in the far West was that he was an Englishman. That was occasioned by the fact that in written and spoken word he uttered the English language in its fullest purity, and it was further due to certain mannerisms of voice, dress—in short, to his entire outward appearance. His classic English he had acquired during his something like three years' residence in London in the early 'seventies,—in Victorian England.

The first books by Bierce were issued in London. They sparkled with fantastic *diablerie*, presumptuous, subtle wit, and shocking disrespect. On the title page of the book *The Fiend's Delight* was presented a vignette,—a good-natured, Pickwickian figure who, in sweet tranquillity, was holding a roasting child over a fire with a pair of tongs, while below stood the following moral distich:

Count that day lost whose low descending sun
Views from thy hand no virtuous action done.

This book, as well as *Cobwebs from an Empty Skull*, was issued under the pseudonym Dod Grile

Bierce hated poetasters, and fell unmercifully upon them; for the art of poetry was to him a sacred thing, and he held good verse in the highest honor. To him poetry was the richest and highest fruit attainable by the human mind, the great poet a king among men. His own longing to attain fame as a poet had in it something pathetic.

Another generally accepted belief, which must be rectified, is that Ambrose Bierce's satires and pasquinades were nothing more than one long hymn of hate. His own view was that dolts and fools are the legitimate prey of the satirist, that it is indeed not only his right but his duty to place them in the pillory and lash them into good behavior. Here Pope's *Dunciad* was his model.

How little this rare phenomenon in American literature was understood by the keenly-observant vocational critics may be judged by a sketch by Benjamin De Casseres that appeared recently. In it Bierce was represented to be a man who used slang, along with other words, considered good enough after the style of the language of the street. The truth is that Bierce the purist detested nothing in the world so much as slang. He would certainly turn over in the hot Mexican earth, in which he presumably lies buried, if anything of that sort should come to his ears.

II

I here interrupt Scheffauer in order to emphasize the truth of what he says in the immediately preceding paragraph. As I have not read De Casseres' sketch (I hope to read it before this biography is completed), I do not know whether the alleged use of slang was written or oral. However, various writers have charged that Bierce orally used slang and other vulgar diction and that he wrote in the same manner. I deny that he so wrote, and affirm that he infrequently, and then only under the stress of powerful emotion, made use of vulgarisms in the oral. His diction in ordinary conversation as well as in what he wrote was English of rare

purity. I doubt if any other man ever used English so correct, so uniformly excellent, with solecisms so rare, yet, withal, used the language without effort, as if he had never passed through the barbarism of boyhood and had there acquired linguistic habits difficult to eradicate in later years. Color, piquancy, variants in sentence structure, the "feeling for words," all combined in a diction of inexpressible charm.

Bierce would not even use a style of composition that is now increasingly common among good writers, which I think is justifiable, and which he did not unqualifiedly disapprove: the continuation of the language and the style common to a character, the author keeping up the mental processes and the diction of the character after the speaker had finished what was said within quotation marks—where there is an extension of the thought or acts of the character in rounding out a situation. Not even in mockery would he as the narrator echo the illiterate language of his creature without the use of quotation marks.

To be sure, Bierce would sometimes write in the diction common to childhood, as in the case of the "Little Johnny" stories; but here the boy himself was supposed to be the narrator, the lad necessarily employing the language of his years and environment.

Bierce's aversion to dialect was deeply rooted, and he differentiated dialect from the speech of the merely ignorant—the dialect of a Scotchman or of an Irishman, for example, from the jargon of a Southern negro, an illiterate farmer, or a sweating hod-carrier. Dialect might even reach the dignity of a language. Besides his loathing of the man who would strum on an instrument so sensitive, so exquisite as the English language, Bierce found no interest in ignorance. Louts, their antics, their mental (?) processes, their immoral code, disgusted him as much when he encountered them in books as they did when he shudderingly

passed them in the street. Kitty the housemaid was all right in his room, making his bed, or "making his bed to him," but she had no place in his drawing-room—nor in his literature. Said Ambrose Bierce himself:

"To put a good thought, a tender sentiment, a passionate emotion into faulty words is to defile it. Does a precious stone acquire an added value from a setting of brass? Is a rare and excellent wine better when drunk out of a gourd?"⁴

The trouble with so many of the vocational critics is that they have never read a paragraph of the composition that they set out to criticize, have never met the author, and know nothing whatsoever about the subject-matter and the author under criticism. Few indeed are the formal critics of Ambrose Bierce who have more than a smattering acquaintance with his work. They are "filled up" with what they have *heard* about him from those who have *read* about him, yet have never read a line he ever wrote.

Having been unable to find any sketch by Benjamin De Casseres such as Scheffauer mentioned, since the foregoing account was written I have referred the matter to Mr. De Casseres, sending him the manuscript of the account, and I here publish his letters in reply, with his consent:

Oct. 13, 1928

DEAR MR. NEALE:

Thank you for your offer to let me set myself aright on the Bierce matter. I have been all through my papers and no such statement about Bierce exists. In fact, I might have saved myself the trouble, as the enclosed will explain. It is the statement you asked me to write for your book.

Now, can't we meet next week and have a talk—lunch with me—any day you say.

Sincerely,

BENJAMIN DE CASSERES.

⁴ *The Collected Works*, Vol. XI, p. 184.

The statement to which he refers is as follows:

MR. WALTER NEALE.

DEAR SIR:

I want to thank you for allowing me to see the statement of Herman Scheffauer that I "represented" Bierce "to be a man who used slang along with other words held to be clever" and also for your courtesy in giving me a chance to answer what must seem to be an absurd statement to anyone who knows me personally and who has followed my newspaper work for a quarter of a century—for no one loves good slang more than I do. I have always believed slang to be poetical. I hold, further, that no one can thoroughly understand a language unless he is thoroughly familiar with the argot of the cities.

In a long search through my papers—I keep duplicates of everything I write—and after ransacking my memory—preternaturally keen always—I fail to find any article of mine in which I made such a statement, or any statement derogatory to Ambrose Bierce, whom I have always believed to be one of the greatest satirists that the world has ever produced. My praise for him has been unceasing, my admiration for his style unbounded, and only once did I say anything that might be construed as a criticism of his work, and that was in a review of a book on ghosts printed some years ago in the *New York Sun*, wherein I said that Bierce had not the "ghost-temperament," while Poe, Blake, Hoffmann and others had it; that therefore Bierce plainly manufactured the supernatural thrill, while Poe conveyed it directly from his nerves.

If Bierce had ever used slang it would not have offended me, but would have given me great joy, for it would have been Gargantuan slang, Titanic argot. Further, in Scheffauer's statement he does not give the name of my Bierce "sketch," the paper or date wherein printed. And for just this reason: no such statement by me exists or could exist—seeing my great admiration for both Bierce and slang.

I do not wish to convey the idea that Scheffauer deliberately misrepresented me. He evidently depended on his memory and confused me, I think, with some one else. That he has confused me with someone else I suspect from his

dubbing me a "vocational critic." I have never held a regular salaried position as a literary critic on any publication in my life. All that I have done has been freelance, and that occasionally, preserving my mental independence as religiously as did Bierce.

Thanking you again for the privilege you accord me,
I am sincerely,

BENJAMIN DE CASSERES.

NEW YORK CITY, Oct. 13, 1928.

Oct. 15, 1928

DEAR MR. NEALE:

I am enclosing something for you on our little Bierce controversy which I wish you would put in with the other matter I sent you, if you see fit.

I am enclosing also something I have just discovered among my papers. It will make part of my book called "The American Comedy" also. It appeared in *The Smart Set* in 1913, 14, or 15. As you see, it is a fantasy. Now, I wonder whether Scheffauer took this seriously! It is the only full-size article on Bierce I ever wrote. See the *language* I have put in his mouth!—Villa's! Note, also, the title: "The Last Satire," etc. Will you kindly send back the article from *The Smart Set*. It is the only copy I have.

Sincerely,

BENJAMIN DE CASSERES.

The "something" to which Mr. De Casseres refers in the first paragraph of the immediately preceding letter is as follows:

TO MR. WALTER NEALE.

DEAR MR. NEALE:

I am sending you further as an addition to my letter to you in the matter of the Scheffauer statements the complete excerpt on Bierce from my "The Superman in America," an essay of about nine thousand words written in the winter of 1928, which has never yet been published, but which will become a part of my book called "The American Comedy." After reading the following, I think there can be no doubt in anyone's mind that Mr. Scheffauer had me mixed with someone else.

"A vastly Superior Man of our time in America was Ambrose Bierce. I do not know whether he ever had read Nietzsche. If he had, he would probably have satirized him, for no one escaped that brain sewn with dragon's teeth, the veins and blood-vessels of which were squirming scorpions and tarantulas. Not even his closest friends were immune from that brutal tongue and bitter pen. It, however, would have made no difference to Bierce whether Nietzsche had even existed or not. His masters were Juvenal, Victor Hugo of "*Les Châtiments*" and Swift. I use the word 'masters' apologetically. Bierce was an original—in America a monstrosity, like Poe of the Tales. In America ironic invective, the brutal imagination, moral indignation that wears the face of hate and an unswerving and joyful adherence to the art of making enemies are anathema in a country whose national anthem is *O Be Joyful!* Thumbs down on Bierce, then! He was inhuman—all—too-inhuman. Thou shalt not commit irony!

"Ambrose Bierce was one of our supermen. He had values of his own and roved the cold heavens of apperception with a pitiless eye. His style was sheer, stark, bare, corrosive. A satanic gayety pervaded it. He was a Dionysian Boreas. There are polar blasts in all his pages, in the most trivial. He understood friendship in the manner of an 'antique Roman.' Like Swift, he was ashamed to be human. Which means that at bottom he was tender, human and generous—such is the paradox of these perverse souls. His murderous irony was a veil that covered the incurable melancholy of a being born in the wrong æon. He died against a wall with a sneer at mankind—and at himself, no doubt."

III

Now to return to Scheffauer's article:

After all, it is possible that Ambrose Bierce is not dead. He often gave me the impression that he had an ardent romantic desire to disappear from the world for a number of years, and roam off somewhere, until a contemptuous world should have formed its estimate of him, and until some impassioned criticism of him should afford him the

excuse to return. Then he would come back, confute the slanderers, or enjoy his fame,—or laugh at both.

On the contrary, Bierce roundly denounced men who would disappear in order to give the impression that they were dead, to return later to read what had been said about them. They read no eulogia. There were several notorious performances of the “disappearing act” during Bierce’s later years. Nor was he so foolish as to suppose that his fame would be greatly enhanced within a few months from the time he was supposed to be dead. What he did say (who has not among the persons with just claims to fame?) was that he wished the Ruler of the Universe had ordained that he might return to earth a few centuries hence and discover the place given by posterity to him and to a number of others in literature.

The full height of Bierce’s greatness as one of the most original and fascinating literary figures of our mollusk-like, philistine American civilization will be recognized by a future generation,—perhaps,—but not by the present,—as in the case of Whitman,—and by Europe and not by America. Nevertheless, gradually an art renaissance of his fame is becoming noticeable in his home country.

The tragedy of his apparent uselessness pursued him. This scoffing mind could not put to his life-work the word *finis*, but only the word *minus*,—and then had to flee into the wilderness alone, in order to seek the final solution of the great riddle of life Neitzsche, whom he did not know, would have set him up in a place among his supermen. He was endowed by Nature with eminent gifts, and with rare wisdom, but an ignorant “culture” barred his way.

Yes, “the tragedy of his apparent uselessness pursued him,” but only as all life and the entire universe seemed useless. He did not single out his existence as being particularly futile. He wrote because it gave him pleasure to write; because he could not do otherwise; because of numerous

impulses. He thirsted for fame, if you will—for fame in some distant period of high and general culture.

I know that he sought fame among his contemporaries too, and even accepted as his due the flattery of an "ignorant 'culture'." The "inverted bowl," if set upright, were not a tankard large enough to hold the wine of adulation that he craved. "But why?—O Hell!—why? The uselessness of it all! And the thirst for fame!—man's lowest incentive to achievement!" So he would say. And he would add, I think with truth, that Art for Art's sake motived his life, even if the base ambition to achieve fame at times intruded. Many writers besides Kipling had said it, but perhaps none quite so well, and he thought Kipling's verse expressed his (Bierce's) highest aspiration:

And only the Master shall praise us, and only the Master
shall blame;
And no one shall work for money, and no one shall work
for fame,
But each for the joy of the working, and each, in his separate
star,
Shall draw the Thing as he sees It, for the God of Things
as They are.

Had Bierce lived and worked in England, France, or Germany, he would have developed to his full intellectual height. In America he was like a lion in a great open cage, or like a Gulliver who was held down by a thousand threads of enmity, indifference, and ignorance. He was an author of imposing virility, and he had to dwell in a land where effeminacy was triumphant.

In his wisdom he was a prophet, and it was indeed a tragic author who came with the syllabic books of his satire to a self-satisfied people, who pranced beneath his criticism and failed to benefit by his critical knowledge, but looked upon him rather as Beelzebub and the Devil combined! And surely no people, no country, so greatly needed him,—incorruptible thinker and skilled surgeon that he was,—as did this very America.

CHAPTER XIX

POLLARD AND BIERCE

I

LIKE Pooh-Bah, Percival Pollard was born sneering. Good! He was to find much to sneer at. All his life he sneered; sneering, he died.

He came into this world in 1869, and lived through a period during which American Letters were at a low estate; he died before the pulmotor that he and Ambrose Bierce and James Gibbons Huneker and a few other brave souls applied to the moribund patient had done more than produce a flicker of consciousness. But the pulmotor continued to function after those noble souls had ceased their mortal efforts; their vital words were to be the continuing motive power. Other men were to come forward, too—such men as Royal Cortissoz, Henry L. Mencken, Benjamin De Casseres, and Sinclair Lewis—to continue criticism and satire in America fearlessly.

As I write, I sense a new era already in its incipency, before the bodies of Bierce, Pollard, and Huneker are long cold—an era in which the high art of criticism will flourish untrammelled.

Pollard in his short span performed the work of a Hercules, and no finer books of criticism were produced anywhere in the world during his lifetime than those that he composed; none had greater influence on authors. Published in English, they were in part translated into other languages, notably into Italian, German, and French, and printed in those languages in magazines and in newspapers. In England, too, his criticisms were acclaimed as those of

a master, and were read by persons counted important among the literati.

It was the good fortune of The Neale Publishing Company to issue two of his books of criticisms, *Their Day in Court: the Case of American Letters and Its Causes*, his most voluminous work and the one he counted his most important, which was published in 1909, and *Vagabond Journeys*, which was issued the day his body was cremated, in December, 1911. Both these volumes are now out of print, and what I shall have to say about Pollard cannot be influenced by any pecuniary considerations, for I shall have nothing to gain. One of his notable books of criticisms was published during the brief period that elapsed between the issuance of the two volumes that were published by the Neale house. It was brought out by J. W. Luce & Co., in Boston, in 1911. That volume, *Masks and Minstrels of New Germany*, added to Pollard's fame, which had already extended throughout Europe, and particularly in Germany the book was hailed as a great achievement.

II

Born at Greifswald, Pomerania, of English-German parentage, on January 29, 1869, Pollard came to the United States in 1885, and died in Baltimore, Md., December 17, 1911, while in his forty-second year.

Shortly after the great critic's death, quite an extended account of Pollard was written by Mr. Willard Huntington Wright, himself an able critic, who has achieved deserved distinction in the world of letters, and wide-spread fame for his detective stories as published under the *nom de plume* of S. S. Van Dine, the article being published in *The Sunday Times*, Los Angeles, December 31, 1911. I quote from it as follows:

The only people present at the funeral were Mrs. Pollard, Mrs. Burrows, Ambrose Bierce, Walter Neale, Pollard's publisher, and H. L. Mencken.

A pathetic incident connected with Pollard's death is the fact that his last book, *Vagabond Journeys*, was published the day of his funeral. Pollard had never seen the book. Walter Neale came down from New York with the first three copies. He landed at the undertaker's with them. They actually went to Pollard's funeral.

In the loss of Percival Pollard, America has been deprived of one of her few independent critics. Pollard is one of the very small number of American writers who have fought for the very highest in art and literature. His book, *Their Day in Court*, is America's most tonic contribution to the criticism of art and letters. Throughout all his work, Pollard ever kept his ideal before him. In the face of all manner of adversity, and at the risk of losing his friends, he has fought for what he considered the good, the true and the beautiful. His honesty of opinion has made him known wherever there has been interest in the advancement of American criticism. He wielded, at times, a brutal pen; but it was always in defense of the highest and best standards. His audacity was only equalled by his sincerity. I believe no more characteristic thing could be cited to show the stability of Pollard's nature than what he wrote on the title-page of a book he recently gave me: "To Willard H. Wright from Percival Pollard, who takes this opportunity to assure him that even today, in 1911, he is not ashamed of this yarn, first printed in 1901." It must be remembered that Pollard died a young man.

Pollard has done much—probably more than any other critic—toward eliminating effeminacy from American literature. He was one of the younger generation of critics, and his fight was against the academic, the pedagogic. At the time of Pollard's advent, honest, capable criticism in America was practically unknown; and his determination, coupled with his virility and his power of expression, made him immediately felt.

Pollard was one of the original editors of the *Criterion*, a magazine devoted to literature, drama, music, and art. It

was a sort of young man's review—the first one of its kind ever issued in America. Associated with him at that time were Vance Thompson, Bliss Carman, Charles Henry Meltzer, Walter Blackburn Harte, Charles F. Nirdlinger, and James Metcalfe. The paper was editorially in charge of an Americanized Frenchman—Henri Dumay—and he ran it on a basis probably different from that of any other American journal—namely, of letting each contributor write exactly what he chose. Says Pollard: "As a result, New York had, for about a year, the first paper that had been able to 'make it sit up' since the earliest days of militant journalism. The paper had these qualities—on the importance of which in all critical writing I have always insisted—personality, and prejudice. Eventually the paper succumbed to the increasing cowardice of the business managers. But it had not been wasted. It had shown what was possible. Never again could the croakers say that what the French could do, we could not do also. Also, before the end came, we had our effort at an independent theater, and—no small matter—we added materially to the score of our enemies."

Pollard was one of the prime movers, through the *Criterion*, in the Criterion Independent Theater—an enterprise which, unfortunately, failed. In speaking of this enterprise in *Their Day in Court*, he says: "Beyond what notoriety might indirectly accrue to the periodical instigating it, this effort to divorce our drama from the box office had no other objects save artistic ones. Yet, had you heard the hullabaloo raised by the conservatives, by all the various partners in the league between managers, critics and newspapers to inflict an entirely commercial drama on the community, you would have thought we were nothing less than 'second-story men.' Even in our small circle there may have been black or dingy sheep; but, in the main, we were all simply fighting for art and truth as we saw them." Pollard himself was in the thick of the fight when the smash-up came.

I mention these things to show the issues for which Pollard fought—"for art and truth as we saw them." We have few other men as brave.

From Mencken comes a letter to me with these words: "Those present at his funeral formed a pathetically small party for so clever a fellow, so brave a critic, so honest a writer, so decent a friend. But if Pollard is not well known now it is because he was unfortunately obscured in the very principles of the fight—which is the fate of all pioneers. Let us thank the gods that we had a critic who followed no man in his judgments and who aped no man in his writing."

Walter Neale, one of Pollard's publishers and an old friend, writes to me: "Think of it! This little handful were the only persons who thought it worth while to attend the funeral of the finest man of letters of our literature actively producing. The mightiest critic of our day took leave, with only us to wish him farewell."

William Martin Reedy, in the same mail as Mencken, wrote to tell me of Pollard's death. Says Reedy: "Pollard was a good man and a great writer and an honest critic. His only fault was that he was too considerate of his friends."

Pollard's literary endeavors and adventures have been many, associated with many magazines, one of the original editors of the noted and short-lived *Criterion*, an associate with Reedy on *The Mirror*, the literary reviewer for *Town Topics* since 1897, he, in addition, has many books to his credit. *Figaro Fiction* appeared in 1892; *Cape of Storms* in 1895; *Posters of Today* in 1897; *The Kiss That Killed* in 1898; *The Imitator* in 1901; *Lingo Dan* in 1903; *Recollections of Oscar Wilde* in 1906; *Their Day in Court* in 1909; *Masks and Minstrels of New Germany* in 1911, and *Vagabond Journeys* in 1911.¹

Besides his books, he was joint author with Leo Dietrichstein in *Nocturnes*, produced in 1906. He also wrote *The Ambitious Mrs. Alcott*, a play in four acts, produced at the Ascot Theater in New York in 1907.

When Percival Pollard's notable book of criticism, *Their Day in Court: The Case of American Letters and Its Causes*, was first published somewhat more than a year ago, The Neale Publishing Company of New York, Pollard's publishers, mailed to all the authors whose biogra-

¹ This bibliography, I think, is correct and complete.—W. N.

phies appear in *Who's Who* a circular letter written on stationery bearing its name and address, although the letter was meant to resemble a formidable legal document. Here is a copy of the letter:

THE CASE OF AMERICAN LETTERS
AND ITS CAUSES

PERCIVAL POLLARD

versus

THOMAS THOMPSON

Defendant please take notice that the costs in the above entitled cause amount to \$3.25—\$3.00 for the papers in the case, 25 cents for filing them in the mail.

THE NEALE PUBLISHING COMPANY,
Attorney for the Plaintiff.

With the letter was enclosed a circular that described Pollard's book, the price being given at \$3.00 net, postage 25 cents additional. The letter, of course, was meant to convey to those to whom it was sent that they, being authors, were parties to the Case of American Letters, that American literature had been affected by them, that it might still be further affected by them, and that they might be interested in a book of so great importance as this new critical work.

Pollard, when struck down by death a few days ago, while in his forty-second year, was one of the mightiest literary critics of our day. His estimate of the intelligence and the general fitness of the makers of current American literature seems to have been accurate, for they overwhelmed Pollard's publishers with letters in which they were denounced in the terms of the blackguard. The letter that follows, written by the editor of one of our older magazines, known the world over, seems to be temperate enough to be publishable, although not so the others:

"I have this day received a communication concerning *The Case of American Letters and Its Causes* in which Percival Pollard is named *versus* [here follows the name of the writer of the letter]. As I have never had any dealings with The Neale Publishing Company, or with

Percival Pollard, directly or indirectly and furthermore have not even heard of the publication (presumably) mentioned, it is evident that a mistake has been made, and you have the wrong party. I shall retain the communication pending your explanation, and take advice with my lawyers if there is any further annoyance."

The authors living in New York called to see the Neale people, some of them carrying huge walking sticks, and when Mr. Neale timidly explained the situation, with demonstrations that were within their comprehension, the commotion that followed disturbed the passerby. Finally, a circular letter of apology was found necessary. "In it," said Mr. Neale, "we exercised our finest diplomacy, showing that we were lacking in intelligence when we issued an advertisement so formidable in appearance, one that we had been so unintelligent as to think clever."

Of course, the circular letter of apology was derisive, sarcastic; but I doubt if the recipients believed it to be meant other than in dead earnest.

Bierce was greatly amused by the advertisement and the letters that the circular brought forth. Said he: "What else could you have expected? Here was something new, the application of wit and fine fooling to advertising. Of course you were taken seriously! Who ever before wrote an advertisement that was not ponderously sincere? Who ever before dared play with his 'prospects'? They couldn't believe it, didn't believe it, and thought they had a suit on their hands. You should have known, too, that Americans are without any sense of humor, and those whose autobiographies appear in *Who's Who* are not exceptions." He had his own good fun out of the incident.

He attributed the utter dulness, dumbness, of writers and editors in this country in part to our lack of vigorous criticism: their brains had become atrophied.

III

I began this chapter by saying that Pollard was born sneering, sneered all his life, and died sneering. Even as a lad he was pretty well sophisticated, and by the time he had reached manhood his sophistication was comparable to that of a man of wide experience, widely traveled, and past middle age. At the time of his death I doubt if a more sophisticated human being ever lived. He knew all sorts of existing civilizations—the men and women who comprised the Western world, and more than a little of Orientals. He mingled with all sorts and conditions of men, but largely as an onlooker, not as a participant in their parades.

Particularly did their masques interest him. He had something to do with initiating the cabaret, in Berlin and in Vienna, where it first got a foothold, I believe—that is to say, the cabaret and its night life that finally degenerated into the night club in America. I am not referring to the type of cabaret that probably existed one hundred and fifty years previously in Paris and in a few other Continental cities. The cabaret that Percival Pollard and a few kindred spirits started in Europe really had for its purpose the development of all the arts, in a congenial, informal atmosphere, in which both the pupils and the masters of the arts would foregather, drink, smoke, carouse, dance, exhibit their art works, read original poems, sing original songs, play their own musical compositions on some instrument, introduce new dances—all utterly unrestricted.

In these cabarets there was to be no hired "talent," and even a barber might demonstrate a new lather with a new razor. So, too, this idea crept into America, and for a year or more made some progress. But gradually in this country the cabaret became the night club, infested by the élite of all grades of society: the demure country maiden

on a visit to town; her *grande dame* aunt; her banker uncle; the burglar who had recently ransacked the apartments of her hosts; the chauffeur in whose taxi she had driven from the station; the waiters who had taken her orders at the Ritz; the most recent notorious murderess; the harlot of lauded infamy; the young man-about-town bent upon spending two thousand dollars of an evening on one of the dissolute young hostesses whom he had never seen before and would never see again; girls, almost naked, who would charge \$100 for a dance of one minute, taking on one man after another, and managing to let fall off their bodies the last bit of silk and lace that had covered them. Percival Pollard had indeed started something!

But he was rarely more than an onlooker at any place where he met life. Taciturn, rather morose, suspicious of his associates; inordinately stingy; apparently without the slightest affection for any human being, caring only for Art and for things abstract; sullen; unable to see good in anything except in Art, holding, with Oscar Wilde and James McNeill Whistler, that Art is more important than Nature, higher than Nature, in every respect superior to Nature, that Art alone made life worth while—Percival Pollard concentrated such affections as he possessed on Art alone. A more uncompanionable associate than he could hardly be imagined—when morose and sullen.

The friendship that existed between Pollard and Bierce and between Pollard and me, therefore, was based upon a similarity of views and a community of opinions and conclusions founded upon matured judgments respecting Art as expressed in various media. Pollard was incapable of affection in friendship. The love that existed between Damon and Pythias, between Cato and Cicero, between Hallam and Tennyson, might have been given consideration by Pollard as phases of Art beautifully expressed by

masters; but the sesame of love for any human being—man, woman, or child, himself included—never found lodgment in his heart. Such creatures are repellent: they awaken no love in anybody.

But Pollard ordinarily got along well enough with most persons, and did with Bierce and with me; but not with women. He was too mean, too utterly selfish, too parsimonious, to be pleasing to any woman. Yet, he married twice, and his first wife (I never met her), Bierce said, was cultured, more than ordinarily intelligent, and in many respects quite attractive. His second wife followed another man to the altar soon after she followed Pollard to the crematory. His *chères amies* were scattered mostly through Europe, but populated that country hardly more than sparsely, perhaps due to his own disinclination as well as to his reluctance to desert his higher love—money.

He and Bierce both were fond of boating, and together passed many hours in small boats on Long Island Sound. Pollard was athletic, physically strong, perhaps slightly under six feet, and was well proportioned. He was not a handsome man, but had a face of distinction, the carriage of a man of parts, and was not unimpressive in appearance. Pollard never felt the need of money, and his estate was valued at considerably more than \$100,000 when he died. His income as received from his literary work was considerable, for he was well paid, and he wrote under numerous pseudonyms. Bierce pointed out to him that he made a mistake in writing under a *nom de plume*, and later Pollard bitterly lamented his folly, saying to me that he had squandered an author's best asset—the prestige of his name. But what was he to do? he would ask me, when he would have half a dozen different articles in a single issue of a magazine. He lived frugally, and, although he traveled extensively, did so cheaply. No doubt a part of his wealth was accumu-

lated from his earnings as a writer; but hardly all that he left: he probably inherited a considerable sum. Both Bierce and I assumed that he was as poverty-stricken as he professed to be, and Bierce died before the extent of Pollard's estate was known to anyone but himself, and I only learned its approximate size from his executor when accounting for royalties.

His stinginess used to annoy Bierce time and again. He would borrow from Bierce, without the slightest intention of ever repaying the loan, Bierce would say, and when he felt sure that such was the case, he would threaten legal proceedings, whereupon Pollard would immediately pay up. Bierce's ire was due to the impositions he thought had been practiced upon him, not that he grudged the loan to Pollard, for he would share his till with a mere acquaintance, then forget about it.

IV

Despite the great critical literary work that Pollard was turning out, he found difficulty in effecting its publication in book form, since book publishers were wary of innovations. Furthermore, they did not care to have anything to do with books of literary criticisms, even those of the most tranquil, saying that there was no sale for critical writings. They were right. But they had an ulterior and a vicious motive in denying publication to Pollard, which he laid before Bierce, who, in turn, put the situation before me. Pollard had broiled authors over a hot fire—authors proclaimed by book publishers to be great, authors whose books were the source of the principal income of publishers—and such writers could not be derided with impunity. Moreover, bookbuyers must not suspect that the men and the women whom they had been taught by publishers to believe to be great writers were in reality not great at all, but ig-

norant creatures, utterly unfit to write anything. One of the leading publishers was shocked almost to death—(so Pollard told Bierce) when he read the manuscript of *Their Day in Court: The Case of American Letters and Its Causes*; and later (at the time Pollard called for the decision to publish or not to publish) Pollard found him so agitated that he feared the publisher would suffer an apoplectic stroke any minute.

"Why," I said to Bierce, "that's just the sort of book I would delight to publish."

"But," returned Bierce, "some of your authors are lampooned, and you will surely offend them if you bring out *Their Day in Court*. They may sue you, on the ground that you are damaging them; you, their publisher."

"Let them sue!" I exclaimed.

And it is a fact that I did not care in the least whether they did or not. To me the idea was revolting that any publisher should thus undertake to shackle literary criticism, exercising a baleful censorship, throttling Letters with a mailed hand. I but say the truth when I declare that as a publisher I never rejected a manuscript because of any unworthy motive, through any sense of fear, or because it expressed views contrary to my own.

So *Their Day in Court* and *Vagabond Journeys* were both issued by The Neale Publishing Company, entirely at the expense and at the risk of that house, with a royalty payable to the author, and both were expensive books to produce.

Damaging as were many of the criticisms to the authors flagellated by Pollard, none brought suit, nor could have done so without making himself, or herself, ridiculous. As Bierce used to say, "Neale, never hesitate to publish the truth, no matter how greatly it may damage the culprits, for in doing so you will never be sued for libel: he alone

sues who has been actually libeled." And Bierce never was sued for libel, although he libeled hundreds, perhaps thousands, if we take as being correct the definition of the term as applied by the courts: Truth may be libelous under our laws of libel; the publication of truth must be justifiable.

I never knew whether *Masks and Minstrels of New Germany* was published at the expense of Luce or of Pollard, but I think Luce defrayed all the expenses. If so, that publication and the two books issued for Pollard by The Neale Publishing Company—*Their Day in Court* and *Vagabond Journeys*—were probably the only ones issued at the expense of the publishers, Pollard bearing the expense on all the others. The three mentioned were profitable to both the author and the publishers.

v

That the converging opinions of Bierce, Pollard, and myself, that *Their Day in Court* would be well received upon its publication, at least by those who really counted among critics in both Europe and America, and that the book would be pecuniarily profitable, was borne out by the critiques and the sales.

In the London weekly *Graphic*, Thomas Seccombe devoted half a page to the book, saying, "He has kept me alive as few American critics since Lowell have done," and adding:

A clever and stimulating book, too provocative, perhaps, for these latitudes. But Mr. Pollard, like Will Wimble, is a connoisseur of the lash. . . . Blazing in eulogy or knee-deep in slaughter, Mr. Pollard is consummate . . . Mr. Pollard's severity on the literary conscience of the man who knows how to write, and on the literary critics of America in general, appalls me. . . .

In London *Vanity Fair* a page of comment appeared from

the pen of Frank Powell, from which these extracts are taken:

It is, first and foremost, thoroughly readable, and it is an achievement in itself, to have dealt with American, and, incidentally, English letters in so bright and entertaining a way as to grip the attention from the start. . . . He has written a book about books which is as fascinating as a novel; which carries the imprint of a big personality; a book which is humorous, fresh and unconventional; which, further, is all for truth and the "damns" of life. . . . The best arraignment of the sexual tendency in modern women writers I have ever read. . . . I defy you to lay down this book with other than friendly feelings toward one whose outlook on life is so admirably balanced. . . .

The London *Academy* gave the book a page under the special caption "A Bludgeon From America," and began thus:

In Mr. Percival Pollard's volume we have quite the most remarkable and honestly intentioned book that has come out of America for many a long day. . . . The recommendation which Mr. Pollard brings in his hand for English readers is that, with a few changes of the names of authors, critics, publishers, and newspapers, practically the whole of his volume could be made applicable to English literary and critical affairs. . . . A contribution towards a general discovery and cleansing of the dark places of literature and journalism.

In an article on "The American Novel," in *La Revue*, of Paris (April, 1910), G. Saint-Aubin begins thus: "American novelists are legion to-day, but sacrifice quality to quantity. *The foremost critic of the United States, Percival Pollard*, does not hesitate to declare that mediocrity dominates. . . ."

Several columns in the Italian daily, *La Nazione*, of Florence, were devoted to the book, by R. Nobili. The excerpts here translated are typical:

A man in full knowledge of his subject, rarely gifted with ability and energy, like Percival Pollard, understood from the first moment his book was planned, that the battle was to be hard and fought with all kinds of weapons. . . . A consideration which perhaps largely contributed to the solidity of the book. . . . Such work could have no better title, as it is a real tribunal before which we see passing with cinematographic fidelity, many fallen idols, idols with crumbling clay feet, and bizarre silhouettes. . . . This is not merely a destructive work; it aims to reconstruct, and bring to light true worth. . . . The book contains many interesting remarks on our Italian writers. Rarely, for instance, has D'Annunzio been set in more proper frame Of the success of the book we can judge from the stir it has caused everywhere, and the sour attitude of the official eulogists of all the banalities conforming to the acknowledged canons of American popularity.

VI

In 1911 I offered to Pollard the chief editorship of *Neale's Monthly*, soon to be issued, the staff of which was then being organized. He accepted the position. Bierce was delighted. However, Pollard died before he could begin work, and the publication of the magazine, in consequence, was delayed, the first number not appearing until January, 1913.

From the incipience of *Neale's Monthly* to the time of his disappearance, Bierce took the keenest interest in the magazine, and of course he was one of its contributors. Upon the appearance of the first number he wrote to me a letter as follows:

WASHINGTON, D. C.

DEAR NEALE,

I've been reading the mag. and hasten to offer my congratulations. As a first number it is very good. Even the poetry is a cut above that of the regular magazine sort, and I like exceedingly well two lines in the verses entitled "The Reed."

Bowen's work is very interesting; so are the "Italian Reminiscences."

But the "Letters to the Editor" (of an unpublished magazine!) would have been better in the second number.

I've a suggestion. Enclosed is an article about a mystery of the sea. The incident related is, I think, true in the main—I've been reading about it for many years, and have never seen it disputed. Why not publish it (re-written) and ask for solutions of the mystery in story form—preferably, perhaps, as the narrative of a survivor. I would not offer a "prize" for "the best," but good payment for the one *accepted*. You would probably get a mighty interesting bit of stuff. It is a tempting theme for any writer of imagination and skill. No, I shall not compete.

If the notion does not strike you favorably, please return the clipping, which I've kept a long time with a view to suggesting the scheme to *some* magazine.

When do I get Volume XII of the "C. W."? I want to be finishing my corrections for the edition of 1999.

Sincerely yours,

AMBROSE BIERCE.

January 3, 1913.

The magazine was launched at a time unfavorable to its success. Wilson soon took office as President, and almost immediately there were widespread financial disorders and unrest; and then came the World War. As that war dominated all other interests, I realized the futility of continuing the magazine's publication; so it was suspended, in 1914, and all subscribers were reimbursed in the amount due on unsupplied numbers.

VII

In none of his personal habits was Pollard particularly intemperate. Infrequently I have known him to drink heavily of an evening, especially when he was not paying for the drinks; but I never saw him intoxicated. Alcohol seemed not to affect him at all. His sex contacts were per-

haps less frequent than is usual among bohemians of his bent and standards of moral conduct. Personally, he would say, he was unwilling to admit commercialism into his *affaires de cœur*, and later Bierce would say to me, "For a very good reason: Pollard is unwilling to pay in any form for anything. No woman will ever get even a corset-lace from him. She will even have to pay for the room."

VIII

Bierce esteemed Pollard as: a man of letters whose creative criticisms would endure through many generations yet unborn: as a stylist, hardly approached by other writers of his time; as a critic, thoroughly honest, with a catholicity embracing an intimate knowledge of many phases of art, and particularly of art in literature. Pollard was of great assistance to Bierce, too, in showing to him the trend of modern movements in Europe, rapidly changing, and with which Bierce was not in close contact. With great range of vision, Pollard looked into the future and explored kingdoms of art that in time were bound to be invaded by others. Many of his predictions were fulfilled before Bierce died.

When the acquaintanceship of the two writers began, I am unable to say; but it was established some years before Bierce and I first met. Probably they came into contact personally soon after Bierce went to Washington, in 1896. They would quarrel from time to time; but Pollard would come back, and they would resume a relationship of "watchful waiting." While thus becalmed between squalls, Pollard suddenly died, not giving Bierce the opportunity of peacefully reflecting when he himself came to die that one man whom he had counted a friend had died without his (Bierce's) enmity. That was too bad! Had Bierce only been notified a few days before death unexpectedly over-

took Pollard that the Avenger was about to separate them forever, no doubt he would have picked a quarrel, perhaps by a letter of vilification. As it was, while Bierce and I were at luncheon at the Belvidere, in Baltimore, upon returning from Pollard's cremation, all he said about the dead was: "Well, Pollard in his time has roasted many, and now *he* is being roasted to a turn!" Decidedly, however, Pollard's death shocked him. He felt the loss keenly for the rest of his life.

CHAPTER XX

POLLARD ON BIERCE

I

PERCIVAL POLLARD'S book entitled *Their Day in Court: The Case of American Letters and Its Causes* is a large volume, containing 486 pages and approximating 200,000 words, with a subject index of more than 1,000 entries—quite a large volume, 6x9, with lettering in gold leaf, gilt top, and sold first at \$3 and later at \$5 a volume. The following excerpts that relate to Ambrose Bierce are taken from Chapter VII, pages 238-269—32 pages. I subscribe to all Pollard says in the parts that I quote, except where I indicate to the contrary. The excerpts and my comments follow:

Against slang and against dialect—against any departure from pure English, in fact—one man in America has constantly turned his face. He was the one commanding figure in America in our time; the only American, living in America, who was completely a man of letters, in the finest sense of the term, and who had written what his contemporaries, as well as posterity, must admit as masterpieces.

His name is Ambrose Bierce.

Time and again he inveighed against the "illiterate bumpkins," "who think that they can get close to nature by depicting the sterile lives and limited emotions of the sodhoppers that speak only to tangle their tongues," having reference to the Mary Wilkinses, Mary Murfrees, James Whitcomb Rileys and Will Carletons. About dialect, as distinct from slang and the crimes against colloquialism I have been pointing out, I do not mean to argue; I leave it for a much pleasanter task: giving Mr. Bierce his critical due.

It is easily possible that you have never heard of Ambrose Bierce. If your notion of American literature has been gained from the perusal of the "best sellers" of the last quarter of a century or so, that is more than possible.

Ambrose Bierce, the only one of our men of letters since to be heard of, side by side with Poe and Hawthorne, when our living ears are stopped with clay, committed, for most of his life, the fatal mistake of being, as well as a great literary genius, a great journalist. The greatest satirist since Swift, or Pope, or Byron, he lashed, in prose and verse, always the sinners rather than the sin. That, in this soda-fountain age of ours, was a cardinal offense in the eyes of those little sisters of the rich who say what American literature shall be.

As journalist, Ambrose Bierce was the sole survivor from a period of great journalism.

As a writer of short stories he towered above his generation. When all our current letters are just where today the popular books of the 'Seventies and 'Eighties are, Ambrose Bierce's thin little volume of stories "In the Midst of Life" will still be a great book; no other American book written in the last fifty years will survive so long.

Upon this I stake my own critical reputation.

Having said so much, as succinctly as I can (supposing my reader to be one of those who have been blithely unconscious of our age and our land harboring a genius fit to rank with other geniuses of recent times—with De Maupassant, with Verestchagin, and with Kipling) set down such adequate critical estimate of this great figure in American literature as is his due.

I said that Bierce was a journalist. He survived, indeed, from an age when we had such deserving the name. Before our newspapers became mere maws sucking in news and spewing it out, we had great personalities, and fine prejudices. Raymond, Greeley, and Prentice were of that type; in California were Frank Pixley and Ambrose Bierce, who between them made the San Francisco *Argonaut* into the best weekly paper on the continent. These were all men of strong personalities, strong prejudices. What is, today, most the matter with both our literature and our journalism is

that they are without either of those vitalizing qualities. Critically, as I can not often enough point out, the impersonal manner is impossible in our present sophistication. That manner appeals only to the type of critic who is himself torn by doubts; who harks back, always, to some dim hallucination, compound of tottering judgment and of conventional views which, lazily adopted by such of his critical ancestors as were unoriginal, are now lumped together under the phrase classical; he calls this hallucination a Standard.

Bierce, in journalism, always wielded hearty prejudices and discovered a vigorous personality. He was the journalist whose every line is also literature.

I do not forget the black eye the word journalist has long worn on this side of the water. One of the results of that indiscriminate hospitality to the incompetent which has for so many decades marked our world of printer's ink, was that all amateurs invariably called themselves, while they hung onto the fringes of newspaper life, journalists. So it came about that many of the real workers in the vineyard conceived a genuine hatred for the word. You may recall, however, that Rudyard Kipling, Bernard Shaw and Gilbert Chesterton have often been accused of being, rather than men of letters, glorified journalists. Ambrose Bierce may be mentioned in just the same breath, in just the same way. As a critic he always satisfied his prejudices, often recklessly; but how great was the journalism, the literature that resulted!

Do you think I confuse the terms? No; in criticism—and Bierce was essentially a critic, when he was not poet or tale-teller—the journalistic is the only manner that achieves results. The cloistered attitude in criticism is hopelessly futile. We write for the world we live in; if we believe we write for another, the virtue is gone from us before we set pen to paper. Only in the vitality that comes from addressing with living lips a living audience has the thing in itself any value. Adopt the academic, the impersonal; weigh all things in the scale of your knowledge of the past and your notion of posterity,—and the criticism you give birth to is as useful as a question mark of a stutterer.

The only domain of art into which it might be dangerous to extend this test is poetry. Mr. Bierce himself is Parnassian on that point. The Parnassians become scornful if you suggest that between the world we live in, between the



PERCIVAL POLLARD

From an unsigned drawing given by the subject to Walter Neale

men and women next door to the room we inhabit, and the color of great poetry there should be any correlation whatever; they would keep the matter and manner of true poetry entirely in the domain of dream-stuff. If, they say, poetry is to touch such stuff as you and I are made of, rather than such stuff as dreams are made of, why call it poetry?

But on poetry I have ever confessed myself incompetent ; nothing guides me but a sense of music ; and that, they tell me, is not enough. I have always, at any rate, admitted that Ambrose Bierce was as masterful a critic of poetry as he was of life and literature in general. And on poetry he, in other directions so reckless in his prejudices, kept sternly to the most Parnassian principles, the severest laws of prosody, of form and fancifulness.

In the two paragraphs immediately preceding, Pollard—all unintentionally, no doubt—has misrepresented Bierce, if I correctly understand what Pollard is driving at. There seems to be some confusion of his thought. Bierce vigorously opposed *vers libre* and the faddists with their “new thought” and “new methods.” The rules of prosody to him were inviolable. They were the result of many centuries of experimentation, and centuries ago the processes of the then upstarts (mostly young persons) had been discarded as being inferior or entirely unworkable. The “modernists” among the youth of our time knew but little of the history of verse and of poetry, were unaware of the experiments of Greek, Latin, Italian, German, French, and English versifiers and poets, and their mongrel products certainly could not be classified as verse, but might usually be counted as very poor prose.

The term *verse* comes from the Latin word *vertere*, to turn, and its use in verse means to return, to repeat the form and the metre of the preceding verses or lines.

Metre, then, adherence to the rules of quantity, is essential to verse. All else that is written is prose. In this sense Bierce was a “Parnassian,” as Pollard puts it.

But when Pollard goes on to imply that Bierce held that the poet and the versifier should not move in the world we live in and that in poetry there should be no correlation between actuality and the domain of dream-stuff, and that

dream-stuff alone is the stuff that poetry is made of—why, if I correctly understand that this is the view Pollard has attributed to Bierce, Pollard is wrong. Bierce entertained no such opinion. On the contrary, all his own verse and poetry (and there is an immense amount of his verse) has to do with life as he encountered it. To be sure, dreams and materiality may be interwoven, the dream-stuff leavening the material mass, as frequently is to be found in Bierce's verse and poetry.

Pollard comes perilously near to attributing to Bierce a definition of poetry. Well, Bierce and I discussed poetry and its inherent elements time and again—probably more frequently than we did any other classification of literature. I never knew him to undertake a definition. He would point to verse as examples of poetry that were inherently poetry although apparently merely light verse; for example, many of the verses uttered by the fools in the Shakespearean dramas, saying that if such light verse could produce the emotional effect of poetry, the relief that poetry gives, the ecstasy, as he avowed was the relief afforded by the nonsensical clown ditties—these ditties expressing phases of emotions already stimulated by the preceding matter—this light verse might then truly be esteemed as poetry. So Bierce would discuss other angles of verse, point to properties of poetry in verse not ordinarily regarded as being poetry; or, he might discuss the elements of poetry in some great poem universally held to be poetry: but poetry was too wide in range to be reduced *à la* Hudson Maxim to a definition in one brief sentence.¹ Bierce would have been the last to affirm that poetry should be aloof from life. He did not find a louse unworthy of being chanted by a Robert Burns.

¹ Hudson Maxim's dogmatic summary being: "Poetry is the expression of insensuous thought in sensuous terms by artistic trope." Spread throughout the book, *The Science of Poetry and the Philosophy of Language*.

Let Pollard continue:

I find, since I am launched upon my consideration of Bierce as a journalist, that I am on the horns of a most discommoding dilemma. If I take it that most readers know little of the wonderful prose which Bierce expended so freely as a journalistic critic of men and things, I shall have to quote specimens; and if I do that, you will see at once that it would be far better to read Ambrose Bierce about everything and anything than this stuff of my own. Well—even if my book does no more than that, it will have done something. For in satiric prose there has been no such writer as Ambrose Bierce in our time, on either side of the Atlantic.

Here is how Bierce once voiced the attitude of lashing always the sinner, not the sin, which brought him so many enemies: It is the same attitude which, by good fortune, I in my lesser way, have been able to maintain, so that, today, lacking riches, I still have my self-respect. In reply to one who had accused him of being too much a misanthrope to be a fair critic, he said this:

. Does it really seem to you that contempt for the bad is incompatible with respect for the good?—that hatred of rogues and fools does not imply love of bright and honest folk? Can you really not understand that what is unworthy in life or letters can be known only by comparison with what is worthy? He who bitterly hates the wrong is he who intensely loves the right; indifference to one is indifference to the other. Those who like everything love nothing; a heart of indiscriminate hospitality becomes a boozing ken of tramps and thieves. Where the sentimentalist's love leaves off the cynic's may begin.

It would not be necessary, I think, to quote one other single line to prove to any discriminating person the sort of critic Bierce was, the sort of stuff he worked in. For years, upon the Pacific Coast, he was the terror of fools and rogues, in print and out. His satire played about many

pigmies; the pigmies are gone to the limbo they belonged to; his satire remains.

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Contributing to London *Fun*, in the days of the younger Hood, of George Augustus Sala, and of John Camden Hotten, the publisher, he there established himself as a satirist and humorist of the first rank of those using pure English. This detail is to be remembered, as explaining something of literary appreciation of the man. Also you may see in what soil sprang the roots of his journalistic career.

His books are not many,² but all good. Small collections of humor he had written in London over the signature "Dod Grile" appeared as books there in the 'Seventies, among them was one called *Cobwebs From an Empty Skull*. They deserve memory . . . inasmuch as it was one of them which, lying on an old bookstall, enabled Mr. Gladstone to give one of the few exhibitions of good taste in reading which he ever displayed. Through the expression of his delight in "Dod Grile," Mr. Gladstone revived in London the identity of Ambrose Bierce, and started that appreciation of Bierce's war stories which rekindled our American regard for him. . . .

The book which will carry Bierce's name on to posterity was the collection of stories *In the Midst of Life*. These tales had been printed first in newspapers. The newspapers, you see, have always been large in the story of this great man of letters. They printed these, the finest gems of storytelling in English; they had share in enabling his satiric criticisms to reach the public; and they had as great a share in preventing his literary genius being properly acknowledged in his own land and time. The famous volume referred to was first published privately in San Francisco by a merchant named E. L. G. Steele. His name deserves record in any proper record of American literature. A second collection of Bierce's stories of war and horror was

²At the time of which Pollard wrote—indeed, at the time he wrote—Bierce's books *were* "not many." Now his *Collected Works* comprise twelve large volumes, embracing approximately five thousand pages, as I have said elsewhere in this biography.—W. N.

printed as a book under the title *Can Such Things Be?* From G. A. Danziger's crude translation he made in *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter* a fine English version of Richard Voss's German novel.

In his satiric prose these books are specimens: *Fantastic Fables* and *The Cynic's Word Book*. In verse—a medium wherein he never pretended to work as other than a satirist on ephemeral men and matters; yet in which he accomplished much that was true poetry—we have his *Black Beetles in Amber* and *Shapes of Clay*. The best of his satire long lay buried in newspaper files.

In any discussion by Pollard of verse and poetry he is difficult to follow, due to the fact that he frequently confounds *verse* and *poetry*. Truth to say, he seems to have had the clodhopper's conception of the two terms: to him *verse* was not a term intended merely to differentiate a metrical from a prosaic form of expression; it meant a metrical form that was not *poetry*; and he was not aware that *poetry* may be a property of both *prose* and *verse*, and not at all dependent upon structure. He was unaware that the lightest of verse might also be the greatest of poetry. He divided metrical construction into two kingdoms: *poetry*, the expression of an exalted emotion; *verse*, something not intended to be poetry—not necessarily a mere jingle, but without spiritual significance. So, when Pollard says that in *verse* Bierce never pretended to work as other than a satirist on ephemeral men and matters, he probably means the type of verse in which Bierce did not intend to include poetry. Certain it is that Bierce *did* consider himself a poet, and a very great one, and never "pretended" to the contrary. Pollard truly said of himself, although he thought he lied when he said it, that as a critic of verse and poetry he should not be counted among the gods.

Before I come to that which has already assured his fame, his volume of short stories, let me, by further extracts

from his satiric prose which for years he expended through the impermanent medium of a newspaper, show what sort of a critic he was. That will explain, too, something of his career. You will see how, in our land allegedly of liberty and free speech, the entire American press could conspire to hamper the power and repute of a great critic who castigated the fool rather than the folly, the knave rather than his knavishness. Wheresoever a malefactor engaged Bierce's attention whether the crime was against decent politics, against good citizenship, or against the English language—there resulted criticism that had intrinsic merit far beyond its text. Into that criticism went the vigorous opinion of a strong individuality, and the English of a great man of letters. If he dismayed the fools, he also helped the worthy. Many a reputation that we now consider established—as the fleeting reputation of our current letters goes—owed its origin to Bierce. That detail should be remembered, since his enemies worked so hard so many years to make him out a deadly pessimist, a dealer in hateful personalities. Whereas no person can reasonably read any of his satire without finding therein, behind the apparent expression of strong prejudice, just such cold, clear reasoning, such impeccable logic, as in his fiction has given its pages their wonderful touches of inevitable, relentless tragedy.

You have only to glance in the most careless way at the satire in prose and verse, which Ambrose Bierce for so many years flung forth so recklessly, to see why, in an age of compromise, he was branded "Dangerous" by those who think they command our literature. Where all else was compromise and time-serving, he spoke his mind—a mind wherein were great ideals, of art and of humanity. His critical creed was most completely expressed, I think, in some lines addressed *To a Censor*.³ Him he accused thus:

TO A CENSOR

The delay granted by the weakness and good nature of our judges is responsible for half the murders.—*Daily Newspaper*.

Delay responsible? Why, then, my friend,
Impeach Delay and you will make an end.

³ Pollard, perhaps for lack of space, gives but a part of the piece, I give it in full, taken from pages 110-112, Vol. IV, *The Collected Works*.—W. N.

Thrust vile Delay in jail and let it rot
For doing all the things that it should not.
Put not good-natured judges under bond,
But make Delay in damages respond.
Minos, Æacus, Rhadamanthus, rolled
Into one pitiless, unsmiling scold—
Unsparing censor, be your thongs uncurled
To “lash the rascals naked through the world.”
The rascals? Nay, Rascality’s the thing
Above whose back your knotted scourges sing.

Your satire, truly, like a razor keen,
“Wounds with a touch that’s neither felt nor seen”:
For naught that you assail with falchion free
Has either nerves to feel or eyes to see.
Against abstractions evermore you charge:
You hack no helmet and you need no targe.

That wickedness is wrong and sin a vice,
That wrong’s not right, nor foulness ever nice,
Fearless affirm. All consequences dare:
Smite the offense and the offender spare.
When Ananias and Sapphira lied
Falsehood, had you been there, had surely died.
When money-changers in the Temple sat,
At money-changing you’d have whirled the “cat”
(That John-the-Baptist of the modern pen!)
And all those brokers would have cried, “Amen!”

Good friend, if any judge deserve your blame
Have you no courage, or has he no name?
Upon his method will you wreak your wrath,
Himself all unmolested in his path?
Fall to! fall to!—your club no longer draw
To beat the air or flail a man of straw.
Scorn to do justice like the Saxon thrall
Who cuffed the offender’s shadow on the wall.
Let rascals in the flesh attest your zeal—
Knocked on the mazzard or tripped up at heel!

We know that judges are corrupt. We know
 That crimes are lively and that laws are slow.
 We know that lawyers lie and doctors slay;
 That priests and preachers are but birds of pray;
 That merchants cheat and journalists for gold
 Flatter the vicious while at vice they scold.
 'Tis all familiar as the simple lore
 That two policemen and two thieves make four.

But since, while some are wicked some are good
 (As trees may differ though they all are wood),
 Names here and there, to show whose head is hit,
 The bad would sentence and the good acquit.
 In sparing everybody none you spare:
 Rebukes most personal are least unfair.
 To fire at random if you still prefer,
 And swear at Dog but never kick a cur,
 Permit me yet one ultimate appeal
 To something that you understand and feel:
 Let thrift and vanity your heart persuade—
 You might be read if you would learn your trade.

Good brother censors (you have doubtless guessed
 Not one of you but all are here addressed),
 Remember this: the shaft that seeks the heart
 Draws all eyes after it; an idle dart
 Shot at some shadow flutters o'er the green,
 Its flight unheeded and its fall unseen.

Do you need any other evidence of his calibre and his craft? Do you wonder that in this country of ours, with its hypocrisies, and its pandering to the popular on one hand and the plutocrats on the other, such a writer was a thorn in the majority's flesh.

I have already referred to Bierce's standards of poetry. Those standards were often offended, and as often Bierce let loose the lightning of his wisdom and wit. Especially was his impatience stirred by those who went about the country expounding the nature of poetry, without being themselves, by his criterion, poets. There resulted a philip-

pic against the "Hoosier" versifier, which bred for Bierce one of his largest arrays of enemies. "Poetry," wrote Bierce, "is not incompatible with lowly themes; it may concern itself with the lives and sentiments, the deeds and emotions of the common people. Like the artist, the poet suffuses with the light that is not of earth whatever he touches. But the light is his light; it does not inhere in the subject. (To speak understandingly of poetry one must speak in metaphor, as the poet speaks; it is a thing to be felt, not defined.) Of this light Mr. Riley has not a gleam." He continued, thus:

In the dirt of his "dialect" there is no grain of gold. His pathos is bathos, his sentiment sediment, his "homely philosophy" brute platitudes—beasts of the field of thought. . . . His humor does not amuse. His characters are stupid and forbidding to the last supportable degree; he has just enough of creative power to find them ignoble and leave them offensive. His diction is without felicity, his vocabulary is not English. . . .

Do you wonder that this man made enemies?

Well, if enemies will bring us such literature as Ambrose Bierce has given us, we should pray to God for more of them!

To one who, admitting him a consummate master of the language, had accused him of stamping on the face of his literary inferiors, he replied:

Is it unknown to you that this California of ours is one of the world's moral dark corners—that it is a happy huntinggrounds of rogues and dunces and such small deer, and that they are everywhere and always obstreperous, conspicuous, unscrupulous, dominant? Does it surprise and pain you that I find every year several scores of such, whom I deem deserving of the treatment that you describe in so lively metaphor? Can you not understand that the satisfaction that I find in making enemies is a harmless satisfaction? And what excellent enemies they are! They never tire, they never sleep,

never for a moment anywhere do they forget. No scheme of revenge is too base for them, no lie too monstrous to set going and keep going and keep going. And how sedulously they cloak the scars upon their backs, which would betray their motive:—how soberly they disclaim animosity, even affirm good will and admiration!

Yes, we may love him for his enemies. They may have hindered his immediate reputation; yet every stone they set in his path only helped build the temple of his future.

When, fifteen years ago, a maladroit scribbler syndicated a fantastic comment of Bierce's career . . . mentioning him as "personally one of the gentlest of men," who had doubtless been "embittered by his failures," the subject of his remarks said merely this:

Without enquiring in what my failures have consisted, nor by what inspiration my biographer knows what it is that I am trying to accomplish in this little life, I will let that stand without comment; and carrying in my soul this touching picture of a heart-broken cynic, glittering with tears in the consciousness that nobody but God loves him, yet smiling through his hair as he feels upon his chin the plash of other tears than his, I back away from the sacred scene, and bidding myself a silent farewell, fall first upon my knees, and then upon my fools.

Little wonder that newspaper men should have done their best to fight him. Where there was not open animosity, there was naïve ignorance. Of this latter the *Christian Union*, of April 30, 1892, gave the prime example. It said of his *Soldiers and Civilians*:

There is always a sensation of pleasure in discussing a "new man" in fiction writing. Here, if we mistake not, is one. Ambrose Bierce is certainly a name unknown to fame. . . .

There, kindly as it was meant, was the bitter truth. The man fifty years of age, who for at least twenty years had been the greatest artist in English on our continent, was

"unknown to fame." Yes, so far, his enemies had been successful. But it is only contemporary reputation that can spoil: not fame. . . .

At the same time that the *Christian Union* was recording how ignorant the Atlantic Coast was of America's one great literary genius, the *London Chronicle* was reviewing the book to the extent of columns. . . .

An illuminating chapter would be one recounting faithfully Bierce's experience with publishers.

What these experiences were you may gather, firstly, from the fact that the book which makes him famous was refused by every publisher of importance, and nextly, from the general summing up of their commercial morality:

What [wrote Ambrose Bierce, in *Prattle*, one fine May day in 1892] is a publisher? One of the most famous definitions affirms him to be a person who drinks champagne out of the skulls of authors. Naturally that is an author's definition. The world has accepted it for its wit, with a mental reservation taking account of its probable untruth. . . .

Let it be understood that I write of book publishers only, not of the few noble freaks due to what the evolutionists call accidental variations. . . .

What, then, is a publisher? He is a person who buys of a small class of fools something which he sells to a large class of fools. . . .

Let us see what an author may reasonably hope to get by concession of these gracious gentlemen if he prefer to follow the appointed order of things by publishing first and becoming "famous" afterward. (When comfortably famous, his name on the lips of every black-guard in the land, he may reverse the situation and bring publishers to his terms.) The regular rate to unknown, obscure or only fairly popular authors is ten per cent. of the retail price of each book sold. Let us now inquire in what relation to the project of publication this places the two parties to the transaction. Journalism being the profession that is least unlike that of

literature may fitly be taken to supply the "standard of wages" for use here. Newspaper writers make from one thousand to ten thousand dollars a year; two thousand will serve our purpose well enough as the sum that a writer's time is worth. The most impetuous and prolific novelists with whom Heaven has had the goodness to bless us seldom bring forth more than one whelp at a time—produce more than one book is what I meant to say.

The author of the book-to-be, then, may be considered to have risked two thousand dollars in it—to have put that sum into the enterprise. The publisher, venturing to print a small edition, puts in one-half that amount. Let us be liberal, and, counting in the expenses of distribution, advertising, etc., say an amount just equal. But in dividing the proceeds the publisher takes out of every dollar ninety cents and hands over ten cents to the author. And then the good man executes upon the horn of him a lively fanfaronade in celebration of his generosity in continuing to exist. . . .

While the general argument, as it stands above, is perfect, and ranks with what Pope and Byron have said on cognate subjects, Bierce often returned to these muttons. In one place he wrote:

Of the forty publishers connected by narrative with Ali Baba it is hardly probable they all were equal in enterprise and boldness; most likely some fine, rare soul, some "born leader of men," towered above his fellows in these particulars as a sandhill crane overlooks an even surface of ducks. . . . The reader may chance to remember a story. . . . entitled *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter*. . . . My collaborator recently offered it for publication to the⁴. . . ., above-mentioned descendants of Ali Baba's illustrious contemporary. After due consideration and a correspondence spreading over several weeks they

⁴ Schulte was probably the publisher named.—W. N.

submitted their proposal, and doubtless employed a brass band to celebrate the event. They proposed to print the book and put it on the market, recouping themselves out of the first sales. Having made themselves whole, the rest would be profit. They were willing to let the author in on that—the said author getting one-tenth of it. It goes without saying that the accounts were to be kept by the publisher. They would apparently keep anything.

Lest the matter wear too tragic a face—no more so, however, than it deserves!—let me extract, by way of conclusion, one anecdote from the vast store of Bierce's buried *Prattle*:

John Camden Hotten, the publisher [he wrote], who had given me a check, died of a pork pie in order to beat me out of the money. Knowing nothing of this, I strolled out to his house in Highgate the next morning, and on being told was inexpressibly shocked, for my check was worthless. There was a hope, however: the bank might not have heard; so having pinched the body and ascertained that it was indubitably lifeless, I called a hansom cab and drove furiously bankward. Unfortunately my gondolier steered me past Ludgate station, in the bar whereof our Fleet Street gang of writers had a private table, so I disembarked for a mug of bitter. Unhappily, too, Sala, Tom Hood the younger and others of the scapegrace gang were in their accustomed places. I sat at board, and in the pride of my "scoop" related the sad event. The deceased had not in life enjoyed our favor, and, I blush to say, we all fell to making questionable epitaphs on him. Of the dozens that we turned off, I am able (for my sins) to recall but one. This was by Sala, and, like all the others, was writ in rhyme. It ran thus:

"Hotten,
Rotten,
Forgotten."

Bierce strenuously objected to the inclusion in *Their Day in Court* of the foregoing account of publishers when he read it in manuscript and begged Pollard to leave it all out. What he had said orally and what he had written in this connection, he declared, had been done in bad temper, and that it was manifestly untrue that there was any such unequal division of the profits of the sale of books between author and publisher. Furthermore, Pollard had misquoted him; or, at any rate, had so manipulated what he had said as to convey a meaning that he (Bierce) had not intended. Pollard refused to kill a word, pointing out that what he (Bierce) had said, he had said and had published, and that it was public property, and that he had a right to comment on it as he saw fit. A row between them ensued, which increased in violence until I began to think that a permanent enmity on the part of both would develop. Pollard refused to be swayed by Bierce's intemperate expressions. Whereupon Bierce appealed to me—not to exercise a censorship, but to try to persuade Pollard to kill the story, since it no longer represented his views, if it ever had done so. I declined to take the matter up with Pollard, giving as my reasons: first, that I did not care to interfere with any author in his condemnation of publishers, I being a publisher, and that I would publish a diatribe on publishers as readily as I would a pean to them; second, that I thought Pollard was within his right to quote an author's published words, even if they no longer represented his views, particularly as the author had made no effort to set the public right until an attempt had been made to quote him. While my first reason met with Bierce's approval, my second aroused his ire, and he said that at least Pollard by way of footnote should indicate his (Bierce's) change of mind. So he urged Pollard to include such a footnote. This Pollard refused to do. Within a few weeks the whole row

petered out; hard words had broken no bones; and in time, I think, Bierce was rather glad that his earlier views of publishers were republished upon somebody else's responsibility.

Some nine books are to his credit. For these, however, since in two cases he had new editions, he had eleven publishing firms.

In only two cases did he make enough to pay, at the lowest day-wages, for his time or his typewriting. . . .

The greatest journalist, the greatest tale-teller in America, Ambrose Bierce was also the only man who might have written that which our language has never had, a grammar.

I do not forget Richard Grant White, and the others. But I repeat that, if ever a publisher, in our time or another, issues the Complete Works of Ambrose Bierce,⁵ those volumes will contain more than enough evidence in support of my contention.

As a critic, Bierce wrote of the short story art as one having authority; he ever reckoned it superior to the novel. That argument he clinched by his own short stories. In his argument for that form of art which he himself had used to such splendid ends, he wrote:

Not only is the novel . . . a faulty form of art, but because of its faultiness it has no permanent place in literature. In England it flourished less than a century and a half, beginning with Richardson and ending with Thackeray, since whose death no novels, probably, have been written that are worth attention; though as to this one can not positively say, for of the incalculable multitude written only a few have been read by competent judges, and of these judges few indeed have uttered judgment that is of record. Novels are still produced in suspicious abundance and read with fatal acclaim, but the novel of to-day has no art broader and

⁵ Since this was written publication of *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce* has begun in a limited edition.—P. P.

better than that of its individual sentences—the art of style.⁶

He continues:

Among the other reasons why the novel is both inartistic and impermanent is this—it is mere reporting. True, the reporter creates his plot, incidents and characters, but that itself is a fault, putting the work on a plane distinctly inferior to that of history. Attention is not long engaged by what could, but did not occur to individuals; and it is a canon of the trade that nothing is to go into a novel that might not have occurred. "Probability"—which is but another name for the commonplace—is its keynote. When that is transgressed, as in the fiction of Scott and the greater fiction of Hugo, the work is romance, another and superior thing, addressed to higher faculties with a more imperious insistence. The singular inability to distinguish between the novel and the romance is one of criticism's capital ineptitudes. It is like that of a naturalist who should make a single species of the squirrels and the larks. Equally with the novel, the short story may drag at each remove a lengthening chain of probability, and there are fewer removes. The short story does not, at least, cloy attention, confuse with overlaid impressions and efface its own effect.

Great work has been done in novels. That is only to say that great writers have written them. But great writers may err in their choice of literary media, or may choose them wilfully for something else than their artistic possibilities. It may occur that an author of genius is more concerned for gain than excellence—for the nimble popularity that comes of following a literary fashion than for the sacred credentials to a slow renown. The acclamation of the multitude may be sweet in his ear, the clink of coins, heard in its pauses, grateful to his purse. To their gift of genius the gods add no security

⁶ Page 236, Vol. X, *The Collected Works*.—W. N.

against its misdirection. I wish they did. I wish they would enjoin its diffusion in the novel, as for many centuries they did by forbidding the novel to be. And what more than they gave might we not have had from Virgil, Dante, Tasso, Camoens and Milton if they had not found the epic poem ready to their misguided hands? May there be in Elysium no beds of asphodel and moly for its hardy inventor, whether he was Homer or "another man of the same name."⁷

Which is surely very closely reasoned. The closing reference to the epic poem I had, I must admit, forgotten, until I found it again in my files just now; I had not thought that Bierce had ever come so close to my own notion that poetry is lyric or it is nothing.⁸ But mine, as I have said before, are but the notions of a fanciful person; Bierce's are the deductions of cold logic.

Having chosen the form which he so oft declared to be the superior in fiction, he proceeded to produce, in that form, the finest gems which, in our time, our language knew. Yet, in 1908, Hamilton W. Mabie—one of the typical deans having in charge our literary parochialisms—after admitting that the short story is probably the oldest literary form, and one of the most vital, gave in what purported to be a collection of "Typical American and English Tales" no place to Bierce, beside Poe and Hawthorne, but to James Lane Allen, William Austin and Owen Wister!!!

Whether as satirist, as grammarian,—as an artist, in short, using the English language—Ambrose Bierce will reach posterity or not may be discussed; but that his short stories have assured his fame, is as certain as that Flaubert and Baudelaire are famous.

Just as the newspapers, who had given him his main avenues into print, conspired to retard the renown of Ambrose Bierce, so the Hamilton Mabies of our time long pretended ignorance of his being the only man of genius in America writing short stories.

⁷ Pages 237-238, Vol. X, *The Collected Works*.—W. N.

⁸ Bierce had expressed no such notion.—W. N.

But his thin little volume, *In the Midst of Life*—let me call it, from now on, by the title which, first used for the European edition, has now superseded the *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* on this side of the water also—will be alive when the Hamilton Mabies are “of the missing.”

In this book of his, on which his fame must largely rest, there were but nineteen stories.

I am unable to identify “the thin little volume” comprising nineteen stories. From time to time on both sides of the Atlantic publishers have pirated Bierce’s work, printing a few stories to the edition in some instances, and mutilating the text even so. I have actually seen his stories abridged. Pollard here seems to give the impression that Bierce published only nineteen short stories. In different editions, some of which were authorized by Bierce, the stories of soldiers and civilians, of ghosts and of things mundane, were intermingled, and published in a single volume. So Pollard is even the more misleading. The second volume of *The Collected Works*—*In the Midst of Life (Tales of Soldiers and Civilians)*—contains fifteen stories of soldiers and eleven of civilians. The third volume of *The Collected Works*,—*Can Such Things Be?*—contains twenty-four stories with the title *Can Such Things Be?*; four with the title *The Ways of Ghosts*; four with the title *Soldier Folk*, and ten with the title *Some Haunted Houses*. So these two volumes alone contain sixty-eight short-stories. But that is not all: the eighth volume of *The Collected Works*—*Negligible Tales*—contains stories that embody some of Bierce’s best wit, humor, satire, and fine-fooling. In this volume, with the title *Negligible Tales*, there are fourteen stories; with the title *The Parenticide Club* there are four; with the title *The Fourth Estate* there are four; while with the title *Ocean Wave* there are also four—twenty-six in all. In the second volume, then, there are 403 pages given over to

short stories; in the third, 427 pages, and in the eighth, 264, including the pages preliminary to the text; thus, 1094 pages. Evidently Pollard did not intend to imply that the nineteen stories to which he refers were selected by him for special mention from many others. As a matter of fact, he held (as I do) that there was but little if any difference in degree in the interest and in the artistry of all the prose fiction that Bierce wrote. I do well to emphasize this, for the impression seems to prevail among the misinformed that Bierce's prose fiction comprised only a few short-stories. Here I show ninety-four tales published in *The Collected Works*. And I do not include *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter*, a story of some thirty thousand words, nor his very brief prose fiction, nor the "Little Johnny" stories, nor his *Fantastic Fables*. Nearly all the foregoing matter was published in either newspapers or magazines, and was in part issued in book form before inclusion in *The Collected Works*.

The grimmest of subjects was combined with psychological analysis of the clearest. The method of realism, a style as pure as crystal, went with imaginative vision of the most searching, and the most radiant. Death, in warfare, and in the horrid guise of the supernatural, was painted over and over. Man's terror in the face of such death gave the artist the cue for his wonderful physical and psychological microscopics. You could not pin this work down as realism, or as romance; it was the great human drama—the conflict between life and death—fused through genius. Not Zola in the endless pages of his *Débauche* has ever painted War more faithfully than any of the war stories in this book; not De Maupassant has invented out of War's terrible truths more dramatically imagined plots. The very color and note of War itself are in those pages. There painted an artist who had seen the Thing Itself, and being a genius, had made of it art still greater. I do not hesitate to say that *In the Midst of Life* may live when all other

memories of the American Civil War are gone. . . . The vision-starting, slow, soul-drugging death by hanging; the multiplied, unspeakable death that fills the fields where battle passed; death that comes from sheer terror—death actual and imagined—every sort of death was in those pages, so painted as to make Pierre Loti's *Book of Pity and of Death* seem but feeble fumbling.

Which brings the thought: Whatever else Bierce's detractors allowed him, they never admitted he was human in his art. If you want to spoil your sleep o' nights, they shrugged, read him if you like; but the man is absolutely without heart. Against that I always remember the closing of his story of that amazing, foolish charge undertaken by *A Son of the Gods!*^{*}

. . . . the skirmishers return, gathering up the dead!

Ah, those many, many needless dead! That great soul whose beautiful body is lying over yonder, so conspicuous against the sere hillside—could it not have been spared the bitter consciousness of a vain devotion? Would one exception have marred too much the pitiless perfection of the divine, eternal plan!

His own words, it is true, may partly be used for his own tale-telling genius: it has an almost pitiless perfection. . . . No dramatist ever used the values of surprise more effectively than Bierce. Rarely, until the very last sentence, does he give the illuminating heart of the mysteries he has made so dreadful and so fascinating. This applies to his stories of more or less supernatural horror as well as to his war stories. In his ghost stories we may mention in the same breath only DeMaupassant. (In war stories, as I have said, he had neither forerunner nor peer.)

In psychology, and in humor, Bierce approaches Theodor Hoffmann; but in brevity, in definite sense of form, DeMaupassant is his only rival. Nearly all the other great artists who worked in this vein used subjective psychology; Bierce's was ever severely objective. You have only to read

^{*} This story is published in Vol. II of *The Collected Works*.—W. N.

that wonderful story *The Suitable Surroundings*¹⁰ to see that . . . in Bierce's stories you get no glimpse of a personality. This art, and this prose, was absolutely impersonal; it was relentless as Fate and as purposeless as the diamond.

No greater indictment of the publishing fraternity in America is possible than is the line Ambrose Bierce wrote, in 1901, on the fly-leaf of this book (*In the Midst of Life*): "Denied existence by the chief publishing houses of this country. . . ."

Briefly, if but one volume written in America in our time is to survive for the perusal of future centuries that volume is *In the Midst of Life*.

As an influence on American poetry Bierce emerged into general notice on more than one occasion. It was he who first had given Edwin Markham the encouragement that made him keep courage to remain a poet. When publication of *The Man With the Hoe* swept this continent like a prairie fire, Bierce withdrew his approbation; the poem made for immediate notoriety, but eventually it made for Markham's decline. From being a poet, he became a lecturer. He lectured, in print and out, about poetry and about socialism; but he became more demagogue than artist. . . . He who had sung of Truth that it is enough

If we can be a bugle at her lips,
To scatter her contagion on mankind

became in later years so militant with purpose, so unsatisfied with poetry for merely poetry's sake, that it was little wonder that Bierce, with his passionately severe formula for poets, would have no more of him.

More recently Bierce threw down the gauntlet to contemporary opinion by affirming that a young poet, George Sterling, had in a poem called *Wine of Wizardry* proven himself "incomparably the greatest poet we have on this side of the Atlantic."¹¹ I never saw . . . anything in Sterling's work which came up to these stanzas, surely as

¹⁰ This story appears in Vol. II of *The Collected Works*.—W. N.

¹¹ This Bierce never said. I quote from him in another chapter in this connection from *The Collected Works*, Vol. X, pp. 191, 192.—W. N.

vigorous as any in Kipling's *Recessional*, and surely, also more loftily put:

God of my country and my race!
 So greater than the gods of old—
 So fairer than the prophets told
 Who dimly saw and feared thy face,—

.
 To whom the unceasing suns belong
 And cause is one with consequence,—
 To whose divine, inclusive sense
 The moan is blended with the song,—

Whose laws, imperfect and unjust,
 Thy just and perfect purpose serve:
 The needle, howso'er it swerve
 Still warranting the sailor's trust,—

God, lift thy hand and make us free
 To crown the work thou hast designed.
 O, strike away the chains that bind
 Our souls to one idolatry!

.
 Give thou or more or less, as we
 Shall serve the right or serve the wrong.
 Confirm our freedom but so long
 As we are worthy to be free.

But when (O, distant be the time!)
 Majorities in passion draw
 Insurgent swords to murder Law,
 And all the land is red with crime;

Or,—nearer menace!—when the band
 Of feeble spirits cringe and plead
 To the gigantic strength of Greed,
 And fawn upon his iron hand,—

Nay, when the steps to state are worn
 In hollows by the feet of thieves,
 And Mammon sits among the sheaves
 And chuckles while the reapers mourn:

Then stay thy miracle!—replace
The broken throne, repair the chain,
Restore the interrupted reign
And veil again thy patient face.¹²

These stanzas are from *An Invocation*, written by Ambrose Bierce just twenty years ago for Independence Day.

He never pretended to be a poet. Yet if his *Invocation* is not poetry, then is not the *Recessional* poetry either? I only ask the fair-minded to decide for themselves. My own dilemma is peculiar: I believe in Bierce's judgment of poetry, and he has said he is not a poet. If I must differ with him in anything, it would be about that.¹³

My case is nearly concluded. It culminates with Ambrose Bierce. The sort of rubbish that has constituted the average of that abundant production with which we are told to be satisfied, you have seen; and now you see the stone that builders of our literary temple so reluctantly accepted: Ambrose Bierce. . . .

Although newspapers first printed most of what he wrote, even to the most precious gem of his literature, it was the newspapers also, snarling back under the lashes of his satire, who did their best to hinder his renown. . . .

I mean to be beforehand with those amateurs of obviousness who will try to wave away my appreciation of Ambrose Bierce, man of letters, with the suggestion that Ambrose Bierce, the man, is evidently one of my friends.

They are right; I have that honor. . . . Years after I began to proclaim publicly my admiration of the writer's art, I made the man's acquaintance. We have broken bread together, gone journeys together, lived under the same roof.

¹² This poem, *Invocation*, is contained in Vol. IV of *The Collected Works*, beginning at page 34. It comprises twenty-eight stanzas, and was read at the celebration of Independence, in San Francisco, in 1888. The charge has been made by various persons that Kipling was inspired by *Invocation* when he wrote *Recessional*. Several times I have heard comment to this effect in Bierce's presence. These statements were rather broader than I care to quote. Bierce would neither affirm nor deny any resemblance between the two poems.—W. N.

¹³ If Bierce ever said that he was not a poet, he "said it over the left" and in a way that left his hearers quite well aware that he did very much consider himself to be a poet—one draped in a mantle that even Quintus Horatius Flaccus might not have despised.—W. N.

All of which—though it had no bearing whatever on my opinion of his art—I have counted as a bright interlude in a somewhat monotonous chain of critical and personal experiences. . . . I could name, I think, in two minutes all the writers I have known in person; but—I thank my fortune that Ambrose Bierce was one of them.

That I have known, as man, one great genius in American literature is something I shall ever be thankful for.

With Ambrose Bierce I have discussed men and things; we have fought as often as we have agreed;—notably on the art of painting I deprecate his views; and as to music, I am convinced he has no ear!—I have walked with him step by step over the battlefields of Chickamauga and Look-out Mountain, which he fought on and wrote of; and, in fine, if any ever ask me, now or hereafter:

“Have you known a Man of Letters?”

I can say:

“Yes: Ambrose Bierce.”

.

Let me conclude, then, my appreciation of Ambrose Bierce. In satire he was a giant; in short stories a genius. Look but slightly into his *Cynic's Word Book*¹⁴ and you will find the grammarian and the artist in English. I began my review of him with mention of his concern for our language; I can close it by reiterating that no man in our time did more for English than Ambrose Bierce.

¹⁴ Published in *The Collected Works*, Vol. VII, with the title of *The Devil's Dictionary*.—W. N.

CHAPTER XXI

STERLING AND BIERCE

I

WHILE all Bierce's pupils profited by his instruction, and particularly those who were defective in technique as writers, there were among them some who suffered as well. None received greater benefit, none greater injury, than George Sterling.

Sterling vaulted with one bound, not even being intercepted by Parnassus, from a cage in a bank, where he was a bookkeeper, to Lyra. Having reached that constellation, he fumbled around Vega, listened to the music of the spheres, and received the testimony of the suns. If some of the music that he heard was jazz, then we should bear in mind that some of the constellations are in the shape of a saxophone; and if he became intoxicated, shall we blame him, when there was the Dipper in view? All this as it may be, after Sterling reached the furthestmost bounds of cosmic suns, for a while he never looked back toward the earth; the inhabitants of the planet of his birth and their affairs no longer concerned him. So humanity suffered; the master had too highly attenuated the pupil; George had misinterpreted his instructor; he had come to the belief, before he made his classic leap, that mundane affairs were beneath the notice of any poet, that to give to them any consideration would be to place himself amid such plodders and imitators as Homer, Tasso, Milton, Shakespeare, Byron, Tennyson, Whitman, *et al.* Another of Bierce's pupils, Scheffauer, despised not lowly man, and listened to the music of the human voice, to which he attuned his Orphean

instrument, and heard not the grinding of the spheres as they whirled through space.

Now, while Bierce intended to do no such thing as to teach any writer to despise the earth and its inhabitants, his emphasis upon trope, his insistence upon the pursuit of new imagery in the broadening of the horizon of expression in literature, had the effect of driving out of some of his pupils all humanity. Like most great teachers, he assumed that his pupils knew many things that they did not know, and without full knowledge some of them were bound (under his guidance) to see life with distorted vision and write prose and verse of mechanical purity, technically perfect, glittering with metaphor, but—cold as the Arctic snows. Herman Scheffauer was no George Sterling. In every respect he was his master. Sterling, superficial, ill-read, arrogant in an assumption of knowledge that he did not possess, nevertheless, by utilizing mythology, the Bible, and news items on astronomy, was able to convey by his verse the notion that so great was his greatness that he had found even the temple of the gods to be intolerable, and so had changed his habitat from transitory Olympus to the “unceasing suns.”

Scheffauer was superficial in nothing. Sterling never wrote greater imagery, more felicitous verse, and certainly as a poet Scheffauer was incomparably the greater. Yet was Sterling a great poet. At the time of his death he was also a master of the technique of verse.

Nevertheless, not many years ago, and after he had become widely known, he was writing to Bierce for information about the technique of his craft that might have been answered correctly by innumerable high-school boys. At that time he *did* know that a sonnet comprised fourteen lines, that it was divided into an octave and a sestet, and in its perfect form was made of iambic pentameters; but that was about all he knew of the diamond among all the gems

of verse, and was actually asking Bierce to supply to him the different rhyme-schemes of the sestets of Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Rossetti.

If the pupils of Ambrose Bierce became cynics—and not all did—they at least learned craftsmanship in prose and in verse, Sterling as a prose writer excepted. Furthermore, they learned to sift the tares from the wheat; and they learned to be great artists in the art of composition. He could teach them no more. As he would tell them, "Only God can make authors and trees." This he had told them before Joyce Kilmer had written:

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

—and Jess Dorman had replied:

If I could make such lines as these,
I'd let God go on making trees.

The question has been asked, Why did Ambrose Bierce waste his time with young writers, trying to teach them to write, unless he merely wished to show off, to impress them with his own artistry? There were many reasons why Bierce taught; but he never taught for money, nor for adulation, nor for fame; nor did he hold out his hand in aid of any young author whom he did not believe to be endowed with the divine afflatus. So far as I am aware, every one of his pupils—at least, all among them who followed authorship either as a vocation or as an avocation, earnestly and through a sufficient period of time—became skilled writers, and a number of them great authors, widely recognized as great. Some there are who claim to have been Bierce's pupils who, in point of fact, never were. But where is the author whom he really instructed, who dwelt in his tabernacle for years, who is not a master in the technique of

prose and of verse composition?—Sterling, in prose, excepted.

II

George Sterling was born at Sag Harbor, N. Y., December 1, 1869, and was the son of George Ansel and Mary Parker Havens Sterling. Reared in the Roman Catholic Church, his heart remained Catholic, if not his head, until the hour of his death, by his own hand; for he was a suicide, in 1927. He was educated at private and at public schools and at St. Charles College, a Roman Catholic sort of—well, it's at Ellicott City, Md. In his early manhood, he went to San Francisco to live, and there became private secretary to his uncle, Frank C. Havens, his mother's brother, and a man of large fortune. "Uncle Frank," who took great pride in his profligate nephew, supplied him with money almost as fast as George could spend it, which gives some indication of the bounteous fortune with which Heaven (or Hell) had endowed the avuncular gentleman. In 1896 Sterling married Carrie Rand, of Oakland, Calif., whom I knew only slightly. By Bierce, however, she was described to me as being a woman of unusual charm, intelligence, and beauty, and, moreover, as being given to artistic expression in more than one of the arts. She was, said Bierce, incomparably superior in every way to the innumerable females with whom her husband was wont to dally. She preceded him to the grave, a suicide, the result of a wrecked life.

Writing in the year 1925, in *The American Mercury* for September, Sterling says that he first made Bierce's acquaintance thirty-two years previous to that date. So Sterling was about twenty-five when he and Bierce first met. At the time, the young man's education was meager enough. Seemingly he had very little knowledge of the English lan-

guage, or of any other, and knew as little of rhetoric as a boy in a primary school. Indeed, as late as October 21, 1903, the year that *The Testimony of the Suns and Other Poems* was published, we find Bierce writing to him from Washington, as follows:

As to your problems in grammar.

If you say: "There is no hope *or* fear," you say that *one* of them does not exist. In saying: "There is no hope *nor* fear," you say that *both* do not exist—which is what you mean.

"Not to weary you, I shall say that I fetched the book from his cabin." Whether this is preferable to "I will say" depends on just what is meant; both are grammatical. The "shall" merely indicates an intention to say; the "will" implies a certain shade of concession in saying it.

It is no trouble to answer such questions, *nor* to do anything else to please you. I hope I make it clear.

Sterling himself gave out the foregoing letter for publication, not realizing, perhaps, that it was rather damaging to his self-promulgated reputation for scholarship, which he was then professing, and ever afterward professed. The letter is printed at page 79 of the Pope collection of *Letters of Ambrose Bierce*, elsewhere mentioned in this volume. To that book of letters Sterling contributed a foreword.

In other letters written to Sterling we find Bierce carefully leading the poet, then nearing middle age, through the maze of grammar-school English, the "either-or"—"neither-nor" steps; recommending books of synonyms, antonyms, English-made-easy books, first steps in prosody, and other childish pap to the middle-aged lad. In the Pope book of letters, at page 46, we find this excerpt from a letter written by Bierce to Sterling from Washington, May 2, 1901: "But I remember that you asked the title of a book of synonyms. It is Roget's 'Thesaurus,' a good and useful book." The appalling ignorance of Sterling of simple rules

of English grammar, up to the time of his death, seems almost unbelievable. Yet, the while, he was writing poetry truly great, using colorful words, and apparently he had an extensive vocabulary. I say *apparently*; to me it is apparent that he dug his vocabulary out of the dictionary as he needed it—not out of a rhyming-dictionary, either, but any near at hand. In my mind's eye I can see him sitting down to write *A Wine of Wizardry*; outspread before him, on a large flat desk, the book Bierce had recommended, Roget's *Thesaurus*; Webster's *Unabridged*; a Bohn's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; the Book of Job; Bierce's *Invocation*; the three volumes of *Mother Tongue Series*; a scrap-book of articles on astronomy as published in the *Examiner*, and his old love, *First Steps in English Prosody*. Nevertheless, some of his poetry as written in his later years is great.

Unlike Swinburne, he could do well enough without a rhyming dictionary; at least, I never heard of his use of that aid to verse-makers. But his prose was as cheap as that of a high-school essayist. He simply could not write prose fit to read, nor ever did.

III

As late as February 17, 1901, when Sterling had been writing verse for something like ten years, he seems to have been woefully ignorant of the sonnet, its form, its structure, its history, and its variations. The great and voluminous literature that has been builded on the sonnet was unknown to him. Nevertheless, we soon find him asserting his virtuosity in that most difficult instrument of all the poetic orchestra, and it is a marvelous fact that he played it well, if seldom superbly. But the sonnet is like unto a woman in this: it cannot be somewhat chaste. It must be altogether good or thoroughly bad. After he discovered the sonnet, he used that form almost entirely for a while, mainly the

Petrarchan form; but toward the end of his life he returned to other mediums of expression in verse.

Yet, in the Pope book of letters, pp. 44, 45, a letter from Bierce to Sterling, dated Washington, February 17, 1901, contains the following matter, comprising an A-B-C-lesson in the sonnet:

“Regular,” or

“Italian Form”

(Petrarch): [Here follow the Petrarchan octave form and one of the Petrarchan sestet forms.]

“English Form”

(Shakspear’s): [Here follows the regular Shakspearean form of both octave and sestet.]

“Modern English”: 1, 2, 2, 1, 1, 2, 2, 1. Two or three rhymes; any arrangement.

There are good reasons for preferring the regular Italian form created by Petrarch—who knew a thing or two; and sometimes good reason for another arrangement—of the sestet lines. If one should sacrifice a great thought to be like Petrarch, one would not resemble him.

This letter of Bierce the master to Sterling the pupil was inadequate, misleading, insufficient at every point, and unworthy of a master giving to his pupil a first lesson in a subject.

No such sonnet form as “Modern English” is known to the sonneteer; “two or three lines; any arrangement”—piffle!

Petrarch did not create “the regular Italian form,” known as the Petrarchan. It is well known to historians of the sonnet, and accepted by them as being true, that the sonnet that is now styled the Petrarchian was the invention of Pier della Vigne, who was Secretary of State to Frederick II of Sicily, the form of which was slightly varied by Fra Guittone d’Arrezzo. Says William Sharp, writing of the Vigne sonnet, *Peró ch’amore*:

While his little poem differs from the typical Italian sonnet in that the rhyme-arrangement of the octave is simply that of two ordinary conjoint quatrains, or two rhymes throughout, it is a true example in all other particulars.

Referring to Fra Guittone, Sharp goes on to say:

His sonnets are not only the model of those of his great successor, Petrarca, but are also in themselves excellent productions, and especially noteworthy when considered in relation to the circumstances under which they came into existence. . . . But Petrarca and Dante laid an ineffaceable seal on the Guittonian form, not prohibiting minor variations, and even themselves indulging in experimental divergencies: in the hands of the one it gained an exquisite beauty, a subtle music abidingly sweet, and in those of the other a strength and vigour that supplied as it were the masculine element to the already existent feminine.¹

Bierce taught more largely by criticism of his pupils' work by oral discourse, and in this manner taught well; but he made an indifferent teacher when giving instruction by letter. His written lessons were often superficial, often palpably wrong, when it came to technique. In the instant example he was careless; it seems incredible that he could be so careless. He was widely versed in the lore of the sonnet, was a stickler for its purity, roundly denounced those who would take unjustifiable liberties with it, and had written numerous sonnets in all the generally accepted sonnet forms—in the English language only. Bierce and I together read and discussed scores of critical books and papers on the sonnet; so I know that he knew; and if he misled Sterling, as he surely did, it was through no lack of knowledge on the part of the teacher.

How different is this criticism, written from Washington, Bierce to Sterling, April 19, 1904:

¹ *Sonnets of the Nineteenth Century, Edited and Arranged, with a Critical Introduction on the Sonnet*, by William Sharp, pp. xxxiv-xxxv.

No, I don't agree with you about Homer, nor "stand for" your implied view that narrative poetry is "not pure poetry." Poetry seems to me to speak with a thousand voices—"a various language." The miners have a saying: "Gold is where you find it." So is poetry; I'm expecting to find it some day in the price list of a grocery store. I fancy *you* could put it there.

IV

Sterling became a greater poet than Bierce, and in another respect he grew to be a greater artist: as a poseur; and as an actor acting for himself and others, he gave Bierce cards and spades. And that is "going some." When those two histrionic masters got together, the audience witnessed fine acting indeed. I recall one instance when I had a seat in the pit. The pit was the drawing-room of Bierce's apartments at the Navarre, in New York. Before Sterling called, late one afternoon, he had evidently left instructions with two persons to call him up; one, some tradesman; one, his temporary "sweetie." Sure enough, the telephone buzzed, and Sterling treated us to the gruffest, harshest, most uncouth, "bawling out" as inflicted upon the man at the other end of the wire that we had ever heard. Of course the audience was unmindful of the plot; but it soon thickened and became apparent; for the telephone buzzed again, and there poured into the mouthpiece tones so dulcet—ah, so tender!—that the honeyed cadence cloyed the hearers. The ruffian-lover soon took his departure, to heighten the effect, and Bierce promptly exploded. He had been outdone by a greater histrionic master.

V

In the article in the *Mercury* to which I have alluded, Sterling says of Bierce: "I noticed in him a peculiarity found also in Jack London: neither man seemed to require beauty in the object of his affections." True of Bierce, and equally

true of Sterling himself; yet, both married beautiful women. But the temporary "skirts" they wore were badly cut, and never hung well.

If Ambrose Bierce and Herman Scheffauer were physically beautiful, as undoubtedly they were, rivaling the beauty of Endymion, George Sterling was their very antithesis. Had Satan passed a millennium in fashioning Sterling, to rival Caliban, he could not have succeeded better than did the potter who molded this unlovely thing. It didn't look human. But it was tall, well proportioned, virile, yet, withal, as offensive to the eyes (of men) as would be a chimpanzee in the arms of a maiden. None the less, Solomon in all his glory, and Bierce and Scheffauer "trailing clouds of glory," were as naught with the ladies in comparison with this heavy-headed giant. Verily, he put those two old eunuchs King Solomon and Brigham Young to shame. This I affirm despite the prideful boast of one Upton Sinclair that the immaculate George loved but one woman, and that woman Sinclair's wife. Here I yield to the temptation to digress somewhat.

VI

When not in a combative mood, Bierce was a good listener, patient and interested, interested even if he were an authority on the subject-matter under discussion. He enjoyed a good story—and a poor one too, for that matter, since it would ultimately arouse him to resentment. With Percival Pollard, he held that one might learn more from a fool than from a wise man, and he enjoyed the compositions of "literary asses" thoroughly. He asserted that the wise man never surprised him, nor the good literary worker; but the fool was "cram-full" of surprises. Upton Sinclair, for example, used to provoke Bierce to many a derisive smile.

"Neale," he would say, "that cry-baby communist gives me infinite joy. His jungle book was well named: in it the writer showed good evidence that he was born in a jungle and still lived in one. Upon occasion he got lost in Chicago, wandered into a building to inquire his whereabouts, and discovered he was in a slaughter-house. Never before had he known of the existence of an abbatoir. Being a vegetarian, it had never occurred to him that carnivorous man preferred his beefsteak slaughtered."

Then he indulged in a long impassioned phillipic directed against vegetarians. When he had concluded, I asked him what he thought of Sinclair's *Love's Pilgrimage*, advance sheets of which the author had sent to him—in the hope of getting an expression of opinion, Bierce surmised, which would be helpful to Sinclair in exploiting his book. He got nothing. In answer to my inquiry, Bierce said he thought the novel the crudest and, in some respects, the most indecent he had ever read, and believed it to be largely autobiographical. Bierce could not tolerate indecency in books, particularly as written by "literary asses," as he would paradoxically put it. Writers such as Sinclair were responsible for many of Bierce's witticisms.

In *The Bookman* for September, 1927, Sinclair has an article entitled *My Friend George Sterling*. This is typical of the Sinclairian vainglory, twaddle, and avoidance of truth. Bierce was wont to say that Sinclair went farther than any other contemporary writer in impaling Truth on the javelin of Falsehood. "If any way were possible by which a simple statement of fact could be circumlocuted, Sinclair would be certain to find that way," Bierce would say.

Perhaps there is some other man than Sinclair who takes pride in the love of another man for his wife; but he is the only one to come within the range of my vision. In *The Bookman* article he writes:

"A year or two later the fates played a strange prank upon us—he [Sterling] lost his heart to the woman who not long after became my wife."

Sterling at the time was married to Carrie Rand and living with her. But let Sinclair continue:

"For sixteen years his attitude never changed: her marriage made no difference—when he came to visit us, he would follow her about with his eyes and sit and murmur her name as if under a spell; our friends would look at us and smile, but George never cared what they thought."

Nor did Sinclair care what they thought, apparently, unless to glory, as he does in this article, over the love of so prominent a man as Sterling for the Uptonian spouse—a love that Sinclair informs us in his articles resulted in one hundred sonnets being written to his wife by Sterling, sonnets "the most beautiful in the world." These sonnets were later published by Albert & Charles Boni, in 1928, and called by the general title of *Sonnets to Craig*, by George Sterling. "Craig" is the name by which Sinclair's wife is known to her associates. Think of the nocturnal thrills that her husband must experience as he pores over this volume of love sonnets, "the most beautiful in the world," written to the wife of his bosom by another man!

And why did Miss Mary Craig Kimbrough, of Greenwood, Miss., marry Upton Sinclair? He gives the reason. Doubtless Bierce smiled in his long sleep as he read it:

"'That is the first man that ever told me the truth in my life. I am going to marry him'!"

After characterizing his "friend" George Sterling as a drunken sot, a prodigious drinker, thoroughly under the control of "John Bootlegger," Sinclair naïvely informs us that:

"The first time I visited George I was to be the orator at a dinner of the Ruskin Club in Oakland, and George

was to read a poem. We met at the Bohemian Club in San Francisco, and George drank a couple of cocktails on an empty stomach, and we set out. On the ferry-boat I had difficulty in understanding his conversation; and finally the painful realization dawned over me that the great poet was drunk."

Now, I have seen George Sterling take fifteen or twenty drinks in the course of two or three hours and not become drunk. The idea that a heavy drinker such as Sterling could have become drunk on two cocktails and continue drunk all the way from the Bohemian Club in San Francisco to the Ruskin Club in Oakland, crossing a body of water along the way, is pretty crude stuff. But not more so than this marvelously faceted diamond studding the next page of the magazine:

"Mencken was coming to visit George, and just before his coming George was drunk. He was fifty-six years old, and there was no longer any fun about it, but an agony of pain and humiliation; and so he took cyanide of potassium, as he had many times threatened to do."

The great god Mencken had descended from Olympus and was about to appear in all his august divinity before a bit of clay, and mortal fear had seized the awed son of man! Sterling died by his own hand rather than confront the Presence! With such pap Sinclair feeds his toddling and doddering readers.

Of course Sinclair had to hold his digits at his nose and stick out his tongue at Bierce—or at his wraith, since Bierce is dead—so these are the words as written in his article on Sterling:

In his [Sterling's] literary youth he had fallen under the spell of Ambrose Bierce, a great writer, a bitter black cynic, and a cruel, domineering old bigot.

That was Sinclair's puerile answer to the brilliant witti-

cisms that Bierce had directed at him and his kind for years. Truth to say, lacking in both humor and wit, exercising the mental processes of a hobbledehoy, Sinclair attracted Bierce's attention and mine because of his being typical of a considerable body of whining communists who never grow up.

VII

A careful examination of what Sterling has written about Bierce reveals but little original matter. Pretty much all is covered by any one of a number of articles, introductions written for books, dedications, and interviews. He has simply repeated himself time and again, and that, too, in wretched prose. His foreword to the Pope book of letters is largely a reprint of the article entitled *The Shadow Maker* as published in *The American Mercury* for September, 1925. No doubt he had a great deal to say; but he had no sense of selectiveness, and no gift of expression in prose. That is a pitiful account, that *Shadow Maker*; but I give excerpts from it, with a few comments, trying the while to separate the true from the false.

However; Ambrose Bierce's pessimism was, like Twain's, of the sophomoric order, concerned with the immediate state of mankind, and innocent of the implications of infinity, not to mention those of relativity.

To me that is asininity; but, however obscure, is lucid enough for me to pronounce the statement untrue. "Infinity" and "relativity" "listen good," and were words in Sterling's "line"—cosmic, besides intimating a familiarity with Herr Einstein—so in they went.

But I find that I have set myself an impossible task, to separate the true from the false, unless I devote considerable space to the matter, for he has so mingled the two properties as to have both appear in a single sentence, and

has even qualified a statement that is true by a word that either modifies or destroys its truth. For example:

"He was from the start, fresh from the Civil War, a fierce propagandist," which is false, and completes the sentence with a statement that is true, "and much of his polemic was political in character." That sentence he follows with another true statement: "He feared (and spared) neither high nor low, and was invariably ready to assume full responsibility for all his statements."

"He was wounded twice during the war, once in the foot and once in the head," which is true, and then ends the sentence with a falsehood, "and if one is to believe his older brother, Albert, the latter wound had an important influence on his character." Albert told Sterling no such thing. Bierce's head wound did not in the slightest affect his health, nor his character, and if Sterling meant to imply that Bierce's mentality was affected by the wound, he knew the insinuation to be untrue when he made it. The next sentence professes to be a quotation from Albert:

"He was never the same after that," Albert Bierce once told me. "Some of the iron of that shell seemed to stick in his brain, and he became bitter and suspicious, especially of his closer friends. He would remember each failing and slight, fancied or otherwise, of such persons, say nothing of it at the time, and then, many years afterward, release the stored-up poison in a flood." I can bear witness to that trait myself, for I was to find it shown to his brother, to me, and to several others.

I think it hardly possible that Albert Bierce either used the words or had the thought attributed to him. He was not that kind of man. But in Sterling's own composition you will find almost the same words used as his own, with the exception of the statement concerning the effect of the wound, which seems to be here noted for the first time, by anybody. But with that falsehood is mingled truth, for

Bierce was suspicious of his close friends; he did remember each failing and slight, fancied or otherwise, of such persons, say nothing of it at the time, and then, many years afterward, release the stored-up poison in a flood. It is true that Sterling himself was a victim and, I may say, pretty nearly everybody else with whom Bierce was ever in close relationship.

"He honestly believed his judgments infallible, and was intolerant of any dissent, however mildly proffered." That is true, and I have no doubt that Bierce wrote to Sterling, as the latter says he did, saying: "'To unlike a friend is not an easy thing to do'." His description of Bierce the physical man is also accurate.

"And as to modesty, he had so high a degree of it that he was proud to boast that no woman, even his wife, had ever seen him in the buff!" Bierce was modest, but not to the extent that he never exposed his person to men, and he certainly was not "proud to boast that no woman, even his wife, had ever seen him in the buff," as Sterling puts it. Then Sterling goes on to lie deliberately, in order to give an illustration of Bierce's modesty—that is, he lied if Bierce told the truth. Here is Sterling's version:

In witness to that, I have in mind an incident that occurred when he and I were paddling a canoe on the Russian river. We had left the swimming-pool of the Bohemian Club and I was still attired in a bathing-suit which, though somewhat abbreviated, I thought sufficient to the demands of propriety. Before long we saw a canoe coming down the river, propelled by my wife and his niece. He ceased paddling and demanded: "Do you intend to meet my niece in that costume?" "Why not?" I innocently asked. "All I have to say is," he replied, "that if you try it, I'll put a bullet through your guts."

I came perilously near to laughing, but to humor him, laid aside my paddle, dived into the stream and swam back to the swimming-pool. Bierce asserted afterwards, on more

than one occasion, that he would have carried out his threat—and I, at the time, was his closest man-friend, perhaps!

About three months after the event, Bierce told me of the occurrence, repeating the account upon several different occasions, to point some new outrage of immodesty of which Sterling was guilty. Here is Bierce's version, not in his words, but my memory is perfectly clear as to his statement:

Neither Bierce nor Sterling had a bathing-suit with him, so decided to go in swimming naked in the river. They both knew that Mrs. Sterling and Bierce's niece were in a canoe up-stream and that after a while they would paddle down to them; but, as the swimmers could hear the approach of the canoe long before it would come into view, they knew they had ample time in which to get back into their clothes before they could be seen by the ladies. Upon hearing the sound of the paddles, Bierce made for the shore, calling to Sterling to follow. This Sterling refused to do, making obscene remarks, and vowing that he, stripped as he was, would get into the canoe with the girls, and urging Bierce to do likewise. Upon reaching shore and finding his protestations unheeded, Bierce seized his revolver, trained it on Sterling, and commanded him to come in at once, or he would kill him instantly. And he would have killed him, he told me; and so Sterling evidently thought, for he hastened in, and Bierce stood over him, with the revolver still trained, pointed at his heart, until he had covered himself decently, and then Bierce put on his own clothes.

According to Bierce, Sterling was given to parading himself before both men and women stark naked, sometimes when several persons of both sexes were present. He used to have himself photographed in the nude, from all angles, posing at times as a god, again as some brute animal, and at other times in obscene postures. He used to circulate the photographs among his acquaintances, particularly among

the ladies, and Bierce, again to point Sterling's grossness, showed to me a large collection. In every such collection that I have seen—and I have seen only those that Bierce showed to me—there were at least several pictures in which Sterling's external genitals were conspicuously displayed.

Bierce's succeeding years were thenceforth to be spent in Washington . . . and [he] became a daily visitor to the Army and Navy Club, where alone he was accosted by his title of major, a distinction of which he was careful to let the Californians know nothing, as he had a supreme distaste for the appanages of pomp and circumstance.

Bierce was a member of the Army and Navy Club, and at the time of his death had been a member for many years, which fact seems to have been unknown to Sterling.

Not only was he addressed as Major by nearly everybody who knew him at all, but he insisted upon that title being given to him, and in several articles that he wrote, and in his book entitled *Write it Right*, he made the point that a man should be called by his true title, whatever it might be, if he had some other title than "Mr." In my early acquaintance with him, I once heard him addressed as "Colonel," and assumed that to have been the rank he had achieved in the army. Upon so addressing him by letter, he wrote in protest, saying that he was a major by brevet and did not care to be addressed by either a lower or a higher title than major. Thereafter I never addressed him by any other title, and he was distinctly offended when he was called "Ambrose" or "Bierce" by even his close associates.

Pity it is that our [London's and Sterling's] idealism, for it was little more, should have been the stumbling block in his friendship for Jack London and me.

Sterling, Upton Sinclair, and a number of other communists—particularly the followers of Jack London—have represented that there was a close bond of friendship ex-

isting between Bierce and London, that they knew each other personally and intimately and had frequently foregathered. The truth of the matter is that Bierce thoroughly detested London, refused to write to him, and had no intercourse with him of any nature, except once, in 1910, when he casually met London at a performance of the Jinks, in the Redwoods. That was the first and the last time he ever saw London, and then both men were drunk—Bierce drinking until he finally became unconscious. Despite Sterling's statement, in the paragraph last quoted, "in his friendship for Jack London," in this same article Sterling describes the meeting between Bierce and London as being both the first and the last. Yet, time and again, Sterling has written, and has said orally, that Bierce and London were close, warm, intimate friends, and has had so little sense of proportion as to imply this in the article now under discussion—so little proportion, for in that same article he says they had met but once.

Referring to the meeting above described, Sterling writes:

That was the only occasion on which I saw Bierce in the least degree under the influence of his potations. He was a supreme tankard-man, and would drink anything alcoholic, though his taste was for the light, white wine of the Napa Valley, a better vintage, at its best, than the eastern seaboard realizes. But when in Oakland or San Francisco he was accustomed to duplicate the other man's drink, and always put in the final order, an honor that many a man tried, at his cost, to wrest from him.

That is a good example of the way in which Sterling has mingled truth and falsehood throughout this article. If he never saw Bierce drunk except on that particular occasion, the reason was that he himself was so drunk as to have lost the power of observation. Infrequent indeed were the times when Bierce and Sterling were together when both were not

drunk, thoroughly drunk, Sterling succumbing sooner than Bierce.

As to this advertisement of Napa Valley wine, when Bierce drank it and could get something else to drink at the same time, he drank hard liquor along with it—brandy, whiskey, or liqueurs, or all. I do not recall that I ever saw Bierce drink any kind of wine—and he always took the heaviest available—that he did not drink along with it heavy intoxicants. His taste in liquors would vary. For a year or so he would drink principally brandy, then rye whiskey for about the same length of time; Bénédictine, in preference to Chartreuse or any other liqueur, and usually floated his liqueur in brandy, or topped it off with brandy. Infrequently, as a pick-me-up, he would take an absinthe frappée. Many of the cordials he never drank when either Bénédictine or Chartreuse was available, such liqueurs as kummel, for example. He cultivated a taste for champagne cocktails, which I would never drink with him, I taking my champagne as the gods gave it. For this concoction he preferred Cook's Imperial, not for the reason that it was inexpensive, but because he liked its peculiar dryness. He would make his own cocktail, comprising a lump of sugar soaked in Angostura Bitters, upon which he would pour the champagne, and then he would put a squirt or two of Angostura on top. It was a desecration of a consecrated wine. He had a *penchant* for red wines, particularly for Pontet Canet, but seldom drank the expensive Burgundies, saying they were beyond his means.

I have mentioned wine. Coming in turn to song, I cannot recall ever having heard Bierce join in one of our bacchanalian choruses, either at the camp-fire or at the bar.

Elsewhere in this volume I have said that I have never heard Bierce try to sing. I doubt if he could have turned a

tune. But I never asked him if he could, simply neglecting to do so. He could play no musical instrument.

As to the third of the attractions that are said to reconcile us to life, let me say that Bierce found his main happiness, intermittent as that may have been, in the society of the woman for whom he cared most at the time. . . . I quote from one of his letters: "Girls is pizen, but not necessarily fatal. I've taken 'em in large doses all my life, and suffered pangs enough to equip a number of small hells, but never has one of them paralyzed the inner working man But I am not a poet. Moreover, as I've not yet put off my armor, I oughtn't to boast."

I doubt if Bierce had as many love affairs as Sterling seems to have thought; but doubtless Bierce led Sterling to think him a lineal descendant of the late Don Juan.

It is true, as Sterling affirms, that Bierce was an anti-feminist.

It is also true, as Sterling says, that he prided himself upon being an "indifferent patriot," although I am certain that his indifference was purely intellectual and not of the heart. Reason told him that a type of patriotism was all wrong; but he fought for his country, and there was no time later when he would not have done so, even in an unjust war. But he denied that he would fight for injustice.

On which division of his work Bierce must base his claim to what we are pleased to term literary immortality is a question that has been much argued. Like Poe, he was great in both prose and verse, but it was his satirical work in the latter category that he himself considered the more important.

So I have said that Bierce held as to his verse. He was great as an essayist, and I would give as my belief that his first claim to literary immortality would be based upon his essays were it not for the fact that for the greater part they

are also satire. He was greatest when he combined essay and satire.

But he was as great a satirist as we have record of, and in his hands satire become a keen and terrible weapon..It has been deplored that he used his vast equipment of offense on small fry, but, as I have already stated, all the folk with whom he concerned himself satirically shared, in his estimation, a common insignificance, and he saw the great and famous of London or New York condemned in time to a like oblivion.

I take that to be a fair estimate.

Easily the foremost American wit, Bierce also wins our high favor by his remarkable short stories, on which many, indeed, base his first claim to distinction. . . . The appeal of the *macabre* seems unnatural in a man of Bierce's high vitality: We would think rather that his experience in the Civil War would have given him an acute distaste for all that pertains to the dead; yet he was full, as I have said, of anecdotes of the death-bed, the morgue and the grave, some of which I would as soon forget. . . .

Bierce's hatred of radicals seems to have been the result less of logic than of early environment and events. "Born fifty years later," said Jack London, "he'd have been a Socialist, or, more probably, an anarchist." Indeed, Bierce once wrote, "I'm something of a Socialist myself." Yet for the persons engaged in spreading that faith he had but the harshest words. In his early days on the San Francisco *Argonaut* he had been drawn into its war on Dennis Kearney and Sandlotism, and had had his mind tinged with a dislike, which became almost instinctive, for all workers for economic freedom. To cap all, he lost the most beloved of all his sweethearts to a Socialist lecturer, after which no combination of words was adequate to express his loathing for the whole clan. Nor was he much more forbearing with "the distinguished pilots of the upper deep," as he termed preachers.

I don't believe Bierce ever wrote "I am something of a Socialist myself"—not seriously, at any rate. He assuredly

never had "his mind tinged with a dislike, which became almost instinctive, for all workers for economic freedom." To be sure, he did have a dislike of "workers" for the type of "economic freedom" in which Sinclair, London, and Sterling believed—communism, hoboism, and the like. Nor do I believe that Bierce "lost the most beloved of all his sweethearts to a Socialist lecturer." This is the first I have heard of the matter. But if he had, his "loathing of the whole clan" would not have been due to his disappointment in love. Evidently, Sterling likened Bierce to himself, to London, to Sinclair, and to the rest of the loose thinkers—or non-thinkers—at the mercy of their every passing emotion. I have heard Bierce say: "The sheer light of reason having touched none of the tribe, and none having the faculty of reasoning, the best literature of the world has been and ever will be to them sealed in an impenetrable vault."

VIII

There is so much that is untrue in *The Shadow Maker*—false assertions, lightly thrown off; adjectives that falsely describe that which otherwise might be true; wilful perversion of facts—that it would seem almost as if Sterling knew nothing of Bierce the man, had seen nothing of him, and was entirely unfamiliar with his literary work. So contradictory is the article, one statement refuting another, that it comes pretty near, as a whole, to being sheer nonsense.

I may as well say here, even if I repeat, that Bierce frequently expressed to me (and to others) his matured opinion that George Sterling was utterly without conscience, that he was unmoral, without a vestige of morality, and that his obliquity was so pronounced that he was unable even to sense the difference between elemental right and

wrong. That he interested Bierce as an abnormality, that Bierce thought him a great poet—but a great poet in his treatment of inanimate things rather than human beings—is clear enough. But their associations while in contact face to face were largely those of master and pupil, or pathologist and subject, or companions in drink. Bierce had not an atom of affection for him, nor did Sterling have the slightest affection for Bierce, in my opinion, and they invariably separated, after their brief foregatherings, in an ugly humor toward each other.

Bierce, toward the end of life, could no longer tolerate Sterling, told him so, attacked him in print, sent a printed copy of the article to me, and in a letter to me said about everything vituperative within his vocabulary about his erstwhile pupil. The instant quarrel was about a matter that neither held to be important: it was merely the last word preceding an action for divorce—their divorcement from each other. Hundreds of different incidents lead to the final break. Apparently all the fault was with Bierce; looking deeper, however, one can see a multitude of barnacles at the base of the pier, for the greater part deposited by Sterling. But, like Omar Khayyám, Sterling was never deep in anything but wine, and he never saw below the ripple at the surface.

His favorite remedy for crime was the putting to death of *all* criminals [the italics are Sterling's], and he was rather nettled when I replied to that suggestion that as crime was a relative matter, the removal of degree after degree of evil-doers would finally result in his own lone occupation of the planet.

Bierce held no such view, and I am certain never so expressed himself, unless in some light banter. Banter was a dangerous indulgence when practised in the presence of one so lacking in wit and humor as George Sterling. Perhaps a

large part of his misrepresentation was due to his witlessness.

. . . I could easily have disposed of his accusations, one of which was that I had deceived him [Bierce] in asserting that I had financed the publication of his second volume of satiric verse, "Shapes of Clay." How he ever became possessed of so unwarranted a delusion will always be to me, I fear, a mystery. I have now in my desk the receipts of Mr. W. E. Wood, the publisher, for nearly \$600.

In the chapter entitled *The Collected Works* I briefly refer to this matter, saying: "*Shapes of Clay* was brought out by W. E. Wood, in San Francisco, in 1903, and was financed by George Sterling, surreptitiously, who was later reimbursed by Bierce." Bierce gave me a different version. Neither his nor Sterling's agrees with the statements contained in the letters that passed among Bierce, Sterling, and Scheffauer, as recorded in the Pope collection of Bierce letters. Anyhow, the little matter of a charge of theft that Bierce brought against Sterling—Sterling admitted there was such a charge when he said "I had deceived him in asserting that I had financed the publication of his second volume of satiric verse, 'Shapes of Clay'"—does not seem to have distressed Sterling greatly. If Wood had financed the publication, and Sterling had claimed that he had done the financing and had accepted from Bierce six hundred dollars and had applied that sum to his own use, he was guilty of something more than a breach of trust. As a matter of fact, as the Pope book of letters reveals, and as I have good reason to know, Sterling was not at all reprehensible. On the contrary, he deserves a great deal of credit for effecting publication.

But what to Sterling was a charge of theft compared to the heinous accusation that follows?—

His other charge was a more serious one. On the occasion of his first return to California, in 1910 [it was not his first return], he had become engaged to marry a highly gifted and lovable lady of middle age. During the summer of the next year he was for several weeks the guest of my uncle at his eastern residence at Sag Harbor. He was joined there by two women friends, one his secretary, the other a middle-aged school teacher of unimpugned respectability, the two occupying a boarding-house in the vicinity. It was Bierce's complaint that I had reported the fact to his fiancée, with lewd misinterpretations of the matter! "At which," he wrote, "she broke off our engagement and returned to me the trinkets I had given her."

Elsewhere in this volume I have referred to one of the reasons that prompted Bierce to leave California and make his home in Washington—the ladies, one particularly importunate—and that when he was in California (perhaps the last time he was there) a woman tried to force marriage upon him, according to what Bierce told me. The reader is referred to my chapter entitled *His Sex Contacts*. Probably this is the situation to which Sterling erroneously refers. But Bierce certainly was not engaged to the woman, was not in love with her at the time, and there were no trinkets to return. The only woman to whom he might have been engaged, or to whom he might have been married, at the time, was Miss Christiansen. Sterling's whole statement is untrue. He knew it to be untrue when he made it. It would all have been news to Bierce. It is out of the whole cloth. That is my belief.

After reading so astonishing a charge, I went at my earliest opportunity to the lady in question and asked for an explanation. "Oh! it wasn't *you*!" she cried. "It was ———!" I do not care to betray the name, but I have from her a statement entirely exonerating me from so painful a charge. I am certainly unable, however, to supply the reason why Bierce did not, with such matter for resent-

ment in his heart, bring up the matter with me when he was in California in 1912.

But another mystery remains, of more interest: what has become of Bierce's memoirs? He assured more than one friend that he had written them, adding in reference to a great power in the land: "I do not care to have them published while ————'s mother lives—she is too fine a woman."³ But when they do see the light, he will come to my grave and howl!"

Now all persons who had intimacy with Bierce deny knowledge of the whereabouts of the manuscript. Even his greatly loved and trusted secretary, Miss Christiansen, said, shortly before her death, that she knew nothing about it. Surely it would be a fascinating piece of literature! Bierce had no inferiority complex, and was under no humble delusion as to the value of his work. He believed that his position among the great was certain to be conceded by a wiser generation than that with which he was doomed to live out his years.

Bierce never wrote the memoirs, nor a line thereof, in my belief. At times he would tell me that the work was completed, in manuscript form, other than keeping it up to date. At other times he would tell me that he had not written a word, but intended to write, and that the book would shake the firmament. No such chronicle could have been written; it was to lay bare his innermost life, reveal his soul, and show to the earth and its inhabitants how ugly a human being could be—and that creature himself! So he told me. The high hosts of Heaven, the furies of Hell, combined, with all the forces under their control, could not have forced Bierce to write one word in disparagement of himself. Nor could he have forced himself to do so. By nature he was secretive. The idea that he could have revealed himself, naked in body, naked in soul, to anybody, and more especially to his enemies, to me is unthinkable.

³ Mrs. Phoebe A. Hearst—William's mother.—W. N.

IX

I have not attempted to compile a complete bibliography of the works written by George Sterling, but I list below volumes by him to be found in the New York Public Library, not including all the reprints.

The Binding of the Beast, and Other War Verse. San Francisco: A. M. Robertson, 1917.

The Caged Eagle and Other Poems. San Francisco: A. M. Robertson, 1916.

The Evanescent City. San Francisco: A. M. Robertson, 1915.

The House of Orchids, and Other Poems. San Francisco: A. M. Robertson, 1911.

Lilith, a Dramatic Poem. New York: Macmillan, 1926.

Robinson Jeffers, the Man and the Artist. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926.

Rosamund, a Dramatic Poem. San Francisco: A. M. Robertson, 1920.

Sails and Mirage, and Other Poems. San Francisco: A. M. Robertson, 1921.

Sonnets to Craig, with an Introduction by Upton Sinclair. New York: A. & C. Boni, 1928.

The Testimony of the Suns, and Other Poems. San Francisco: A. M. Robertson, 1904.

A Wine of Wizardry, and Other Poems. San Francisco: A. M. Robertson, 1909.

Yosemite, an Ode. San Francisco: A. M. Robertson, 1916.

CHAPTER XXII

BIERCE ON STERLING

I

IN the year 1907 Ambrose Bierce, Jove-like, transformed himself into Pegasus and bore George Sterling on his back to Parnassus. In the *Cosmopolitan Magazine* for September, 1907, Bierce's article entitled *A Poet and His Poem* was first published. As that article was reprinted in *The Collected Works*, Vol. X, pages 177-186, its full text is reprinted here, as follows:

Whatever length of days may be accorded to this magazine, it is not likely to do anything more notable in literature than it accomplishes in this issue by publication of Mr. George Sterling's poem, "A Wine of Wizardry." Doubtless the full significance of this event will not be immediately apprehended by more than a select few, for understanding of poetry has at no time been a very general endowment of our countrymen. After a not inconsiderable acquaintance with American men of letters and men of affairs I find myself unable to name a dozen of whom I should be willing to affirm their possession of this precious gift—for a gift it indubitably is; and of these not all would, in my judgment, be able to discern the light of genius in a poem not authenticated by a name already famous, or credentialed by a general assent. It is not commonly permitted to even the luckiest of poets to "set the Thames on fire" with his first match; and I venture to add that the Hudson is less combustible than the Thames. Anybody can see, or can think that he sees, what has been pointed out, but original discovery is another matter. Carlyle, indeed, has noted that the first impression of a work of genius is disagreeable—which is unfortunate for its author if he is

unknown, for upon editors and publishers a first impression is usually all that he is permitted to make.

From the discouraging operation of these uncongenial conditions Mr. Sterling is not exempt, as the biography of this poem would show; yet Mr. Sterling is not altogether unknown. His book, *The Testimony of the Suns, and Other Poems*, published in 1903, brought him recognition in the literary Nazareth beyond the Rocky Mountains, whose passes are so vigilantly guarded by cis-montane criticism. Indeed, some sense of the might and majesty of the book's title poem succeeded in crossing the dead-line while watch-worn sentinels slept "at their insuperable posts." Of that work I have the temerity to think that in both subject and art it nicks the rock as high as anything of the generation of Tennyson, and a good deal higher than anything of the generation of Kipling; and this despite its absolute destitution of what contemporary taste insists on having—the "human interest." Naturally, a dramatist of the heavens, who takes the suns for his characters, the deeps of space for his stage, and eternity for his "historic period," does not "look into his heart and write" emotionally; but there is room in literature for more than emotion. In the "other poems" of the book the lower need is supplied without extravagance and with no admixture of sentimentality. But what we are here concerned with is "A Wine of Wizardry."

In this remarkable poem the author proves his allegiance to the fundamental faith of the greatest of those "who claim the holy Muse as mate"—a faith which he himself "confessed" thus:

Remiss the ministry they bear
Who serve her with divided heart;
She stands reluctant to impart
Her strength to purpose, end, or care.

Here, as in all his work, we shall look in vain for the "practical," the "helpful." The verses serve no cause, tell no story, point no moral. Their author has no "purpose, end, or care" other than the writing of poetry. His work is as devoid of motive as is the song of a skylark—it is merely poetry. No one knows what poetry is, but to the enlightened few who know what is poetry it is a rare and

deep delight to find it in the form of virgin gold. "Gold," says the miner "vext with odious subtlety" of the mineralogist with his theories of deposit—"gold is where you find it." It is no less precious whether you have crushed it from the rock, or washed it from the gravel, but some of us care to be spared the labor of reduction, of sluicing. Mr. Sterling's reader needs no outfit of mill and pan.

I am not of those who deem it a service to letters to "encourage" mediocrity—that is one of the many ways to starve genius. From the amiable judgment of the "friendly critic" with his heart in his head, otherwise unoccupied, and the *laudator literarum* who finds every month, or every week—according to his employment by magazine or newspaper—more great books than I have had the luck to find in a half-century, I dissent. My notion is that an age which produces a half-dozen good writers and twenty books worth reading is a memorable age. I think, too, that contemporary criticism is of small service, and popular acclaim of none at all, in enabling us to know who are the good authors and which the good books. Naturally, then, I am not over-trustful of my own judgment, nor hot in hope of its acceptance. Yet I steadfastly believe and hardily affirm that George Sterling is a very great poet—incomparably the greatest that we have on this side of the Atlantic. And of this particular poem I hold that not in a lifetime has our literature had any new thing of equal length containing so much poetry and so little else. It is as full of light and color and fire as any of the "ardent gems" that burn and sparkle in its lines. It has all the imagination of "Comus" and all the fancy of "The Faerie Queene." If Leigh Hunt should return to earth to part and catalogue these two precious qualities he would find them in so confusing abundance and so inextricably interlaced that he would fly in despair from the impossible task.

Great lines are not all that go to the making of great poetry, but a poem with many great lines is a great poem, even if it have—as usually it has, and as "A Wine of Wizardry" has not—prosaic lines as well. To quote all the striking passages in Mr. Sterling's poem would be to

quote most of the poem, but I will ask the reader's attention to some of the most graphic and memorable.

A cowed magician peering on the damned
Thro' vials wherein a splendid poison burns.

'Mid pulse of dungeoned forges down the stunned,
Undominated firmament.

It is not for me to say what may be meant here by “undominated,” any more than to explain what Shakespeare meant by

To lie in cold *obstruction* and to rot.

A poet makes his own words and his own definitions: it is for the rest of us to accept them and see to it that there is no interference by that feeble folk, the lexicographers.

a dell where some mad girl hath flung
A bracelet that the painted lizards fear—
Red pyres of muffled light!

Dull fires of dusty jewels that have bound
The brows of naked Ashtaroth.

she marks the seaward flight
Of homing dragons dark upon the West.

Where crafty gnomes with scarlet eyes conspire
To quench Aldebaran's affronting fire.

Red-embered rubies smoulder in the gloom,
Betrayed by lamps that nurse a sullen flame.

silent ghouls,

Whose king hath digged a sombre carcanet
And necklaces with fevered opals set.

Unresting hydras wrought of bloody light
Dip to the ocean's phosphorescent caves.

What other words could so vividly describe gleams of fire on a troubled sea? Who but a masterful poet could describe them at all?

There priestesses in purple robes hold each
A sultry garnet to the sea-linkt sun,
Or, just before the colored morning shakes
A splendor on the ruby-sanded beach,
Cry unto Betelgeuze a mystic word.

Faith! I would give value to know that word!

Where icy philters brim with scarlet foam.

Satan, yawning on his brazen seat,
Fondles a screaming thing his fiends have flayed.

A sick enchantress scans the dark to curse,
Beside a caldron vext with harlots' blood,
The stars of that red Sign which spells her doom.

halls
In which dead Merlin's prowling ape hath spilt
A vial squat whose scarlet venom crawls
To ciphers bright and terrible.

ere the tomb-thrown echoings have ceased,
The blue-eyed vampire, sated at her feast,
Smiles bloodily against the leprous moon.

Of that last picture—ghastly enough, I grant you, to affect the spine of the Philistine with a chronic chill if he could understand it—I can only repeat here what I said elsewhere while the poem was in manuscript: that it seems to me not inferior in power upon the imagination to Coleridge's

A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon lover,

or Keats'

magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faerie lands forlorn—

passages which Rossetti pronounced the two Pillars of Hercules of human thought.

One of a poet's most authenticating credentials may be found in his epithets. In them is the supreme ordeal to

which he must come and from which is no appeal. The epithets of the versifier, the mere metrician, are either contained in their substantives or add nothing that is worth while to the meaning; those of the true poet are instinct with novel and felicitous significances. They personify, ennoble, exalt, spiritualize, endow with thought and feeling, touch to action like the spear of Ithuriel. The prosaic mind can no more evolve such than ditch-water in a champagne-glass can sparkle and effervesce, or cold iron give off coruscations when hammered. Have the patience to consider a few of Mr. Sterling's epithets, besides those in the lines already quoted:

"Purpled" realm; "striving" billows; "wattled" monsters; "timid" sapphires of the snow; "lit" wastes; a "stained" twilight of the South; "tiny" twilight in the jacinth, and "wintry" orb of the moonstone; "winy" agate and "banded" onyx; "lustrous" rivers; "glowering" pyres of the burning-ghaut, and so forth.

Do such words come by taking thought? Do they come ever to the made poet?—to the "poet of the day"—poet by resolution of a "committee on literary exercises"? Fancy the poor pretender, conscious of his pretense and sternly determined to conceal it, laboring with a brave confusion of legs and a copious excretion of honest sweat to evolve felicities like these!

Of course Bierce laid himself open to attack by the foregoing article—invited it, indeed, by insulting his readers, and by an unjustifiable laudation of Sterling the poet. It is the most vulnerable of all Bierce's critical essays, in my judgment. He came precious near to making himself ridiculous. In fact, he did, in the eyes of nearly all men and women of letters of his time who read the controversial papers that resulted. Their gibes, the ridicule they heaped upon him, seems to me to have been justified. "Log-rolling!" said a few. And it was—bare-faced, outrageous. Yet Bierce had been excoriating log-rollers for years. That charge made

him wince. He referred to it every time I saw him, for years; nor did he ever deny its truth—not to me, at any rate.

But glory be! One of the results was the superb defense and satire that followed. Nevertheless his defense, the text of which I quote in full, was vulnerable. First published in *The Cosmopolitan Magazine*, for December, 1907, with the title of *An Insurrection of the Peasantry*, the following reprint is from *The Collected Works*, Vol. X, pages 189-208:

When a man of genius who is not famous writes a notable poem he must expect one or two of three things: indifference, indignation, ridicule. In commending Mr. George Sterling's "A Wine of Wizardry," published in the September number of this magazine, I had this reception of his work in confident expectation and should have mistrusted my judgment if it had not followed. The promptitude of the chorus of denunciation and scorn has attested the superb character of the poet's work and is most gratifying.

The reason for the inevitable note of dissent is not far to seek; it inheres in the constitution of the human mind, which is instinctively hostile to what is "out of the common"—and a work of genius is pretty sure to be that. It is by utterance of uncommon thoughts, opinions, sentiments, and fancies that genius is known. All distinction is difference, unconformity. He who is as others are—whose mental processes and manner of expression follow the familiar order—is readily acceptable because easily intelligible to those whose narrow intelligence, barren imagination, and meager vocabulary he shares. "Why, that is great!" says that complacent dullard, "the average man," smiling approval. "I have thought that a hundred times myself!"—thereby providing abundant evidence that it is not great, nor of any value whatever. To "the average man" what is new is inconceivable, and what he does not understand affronts him. And he is the first arbiter in letters and art. In this "fierce democracie" he dominates literature with a fat and heavy hand—a hand that is not always unfamiliar with the critic's pen.

In returning here to the subject of Mr. Sterling's poem I have no intention of expounding and explaining it to persons who know nothing of poetry and are inaccessible to instruction. Those who, in the amusing controversy which I unwittingly set raging round Mr. Sterling's name, have spoken for them are in equal mental darkness and somewhat thicker moral, as it is my humble hope to show.

When the cause to be served is ignorance, the means of service is invariably misrepresentation. The champion of offended Dulness falsifies in statement and cheats in argument, for he serves a client without a conscience. A knowledge of right and wrong is not acquired to-day, as in the time of Adam and Eve, by eating an apple; and it is attained by only the highest intelligences.

But before undertaking the task of pointing out the moral unworth of my honorable opponents, it seems worth while to explain that the proponent of the controversy has had the misfortune to misunderstand the question at issue. He has repeatedly fallen into the error of affirming, with all the emphasis of shouting capitals, that "Ambrose Bierce says it [*A Wine of Wizardry*] is the greatest poem ever written in America," and at least once has declared that I pronounced it "the only great poem ever written in America." If the dispute had been prolonged I shudder to think that his disobedient understanding might have misled him to say that I swore it was the only great poem ever written, in all the world.

To those who know me it is hardly needful, I hope, to explain that I said none of the words so generously put into my mouth, for it is obvious that I have not seen, and could not have seen, all the poems that have been written in America. To have pronounced such a judgment without all the evidence would have been to resemble my opponents—which God forbid! In point of fact, I do not consider the poem the greatest ever written in America; Mr. Sterling himself, for example, has written a greater. Exposed to so hardy and impenitent misrepresentation I feel a need of the consolations of religion: I should like positively to know where my critics are going to when they die. From

my present faltering faith in their future I derive an imperfect comfort.

Naturally, not all protagonists of the commonplace who have uttered their minds about this matter are entitled to notice. The Baseball Reporter who, says Mr. Brisbane, "like Mr. Sterling, is a poet," the Sweet Singer of Slang, the Simian Lexicographer of Misinformation, and the Queen of Platitudinaria who has renounced the sin-and-sugar of youth for the milk-and-morality of age must try to forgive me if I leave them grinning through their respective horse-collars to a not unkind inattention.

But Deacon Harvey¹ is a person of note and consequence. On a question of poetry, I am told, he controls nearly the entire Methodist vote. Moreover, he has a notable knack at mastery of the English language, which he handles with no small part of the ease and grace that may have distinguished the impenitent thief carrying his cross up the slope of Calvary. Let the following noble sentences attest the quality of his performance when he is at his best:

A natural hesitation to undertake analysis of the unanalyzable, criticism of the uncriticizable, or, if we may go so far, mention of the unmentionable, yields to your own shrewd forging of the links of circumstance into a chain of duty. That the greatest poem ever written on this hemisphere, having forced its way out of a comfortable lodgment in the brain of an unknown author, should be discovered and heralded by a connoisseur whose pre-eminence is yet to be established, is perhaps in itself not surprising, and yet we must admit that the mere rarity of such a happening would ordinarily preclude the necessity, which otherwise might exist, of searching inquiry as to the attributed transcendentalism of merit.

Surely a man who habitually writes such prose as that must be a good judge of poetry or he would not be a good judge of anything in literature. And what does this Prince

¹ The late Colonel George Harvey, one-time editor of *The North American Review*, and later American Ambassador to the Court of St. James.—W. N.

Paramount of grace and clarity find to condemn in poor Mr. Sterling's poem? Listen with at least one ear each:

We are willing to admit at the outset that in the whole range of American, or, for that matter, English poetry there is no example of a poem crowded with such startling imagery, ambitiously marshaled in lines of such lurid impressiveness, all of which at once arrest attention and would bewilder the esthetic sensibility of a Titan. The poem is made up of an unbroken series of sententious and striking passages, any one of which would have distinguished a whole canto of Dante or Keats, neither of whom would have ventured within that limit to use more than one—such was their niggardly economy.

Here is something "rich and strange" in criticism. Heretofore it has been thought that "wealth of imagery" was about the highest quality that poetry could have, but it seems not; that somewhat tiresome phrase is to be used henceforth to signify condemnation. Of the poem that we wish to commend we must say that it has an admirable poverty of imagination. Deacon Harvey's notion that poets like Dante and Keats deliberately refrained from using more than one "sententious and striking passage" to the canto "goes neare to be fonny." They used as many as occurred to them; no poet uses fewer than he can. If he has only one to a canto, that is not economy; it is indigence.

I observe that even so good a poet and so appreciative a reader of Mr. Sterling as Miss Ina Coolbrith has fallen into the same error as Deacon Harvey. Of "the many pictures presented in that wondrous 'Wine of Wizardry,'" this accomplished woman says: "I think it is a 'poem'—a great poem—but one which, in my humble estimate, might have been made even greater could its creator have permitted himself to drop a little of what some may deem a weakening superfluity of imagery and word-painting."

If one is to make "pictures" in poetry one must do so by word-painting. (I admit the hatefulness of the term "word-painting," through overuse of the name in praise

of the prose that the thing defaces, but it seems that we must use it here.) Only in narrative and didactic poetry, and these are the lowest forms, can there be too much of imagery and word-painting; in a poem essentially graphic, like the one under consideration, they are the strength and soul of the work. "A Wine of Wizardry" is, and was intended to be, a series, a succession, of unrelated pictures, colored (mostly red, naturally) by what gave them birth and being—the reflection of a sunset in a cup of ruddy wine. To talk of too much imagery in a work of that kind is to be like Deacon Harvey.

Imagery, that is to say, imagination, is not only the life and soul of poetry; it is the poetry. That is what Poe had in mind doubtless, when he contended that there could be no such thing as a long poem. He had observed that what are called long poems consist of brief poetical passages connected by long passages of metrical prose—*recitativo*—of oases of green in deserts of gray. The highest flights of imagination have always been observed to be the briefest. George Sterling has created a new standard, another criterion. In "A Wine of Wizardry," as in his longer and greater poem, "The Testimony of the Suns," there is no *recitativo*. His imagination flies with a tireless wing. It never comes to earth for a new spring into the sky, but like the eagle and the albatross, sustains itself as long as he chooses that it shall. His passages of poetry are connected by passages of poetry. In all his work you will find no line of prose. Poets of the present and the future may well "view with alarm" as Statesman Harvey would say—the work that Sterling has cut out for them, the pace that he has set. Poetry must henceforth be not only qualitative but quantitative: it must be *all* poetry. If wise, the critic will note the new criterion that this bold challenge to the centuries has made mandatory. The "long poem" has been shown to be possible; let us see if it become customary.

In affirming Mr. Sterling's primacy among living American poets I have no apology to offer to the many unfortunates who have written to me in the spirit of the man who once said of another: "What! that fellow a great man? Why, he was born right in my town!" It is humbly sub-

mitted, however, that unless the supply of great men is exhausted they must be born somewhere, and the fact that they are seen "close to" by their neighbors does not supply a reasonable presumption against their greatness. Shakespeare himself was once a local and contemporary poet, and even Homer is known to have been born in "seven Grecian cities" through which he "begged his bread." Is Deacon Harvey altogether sure that he is immune to the popular inability to understand that the time and place of a poet's nativity are not decisive as to his rating? He may find a difficulty in believing that a singer of supreme excellence was born right in *his* country and period, but in the words that I have quoted from him he has himself testified to the fact. To be able to write "an unbroken series of sententious and striking passages"; to crowd a poem, as no other in the whole range of our literature has done, with "startling imagery" "in lines of impressiveness," lurid or not; to "arrest attention"; to "bewilder the Titans," Deacon Harvey at their head—that is about as much as the most ambitious poet could wish to accomplish at one sitting. The ordinary harpist harping on his Harpers' would be a long time in doing so much. How any commentator, having in those words conceded my entire claim, could afterward have the hardihood to say, "The poem has no merit," transcends the limits of human comprehension and passes into the dark domain of literary criticism.

Nine in ten of the poem's critics complain of the fantastic, grotesque, or ghastly nature of its fancies. What would these good persons have on the subject of wizardry?—sweet and sunny pictures of rural life?—love scenes in urban drawing-rooms?—beautiful sentiments appropriate to young ladies' albums?—high moral philosophy with an "appeal" to what is "likeliest God within the soul"? Deacon Harvey (O, I cannot get away from Deacon Harvey: he fascinates me!) would have "an interpretation of vital truth." I do not know what that is, but we have his word for it that nothing else is poetry. And no less a person than Mrs. Gertrude Atherton demands, instead of wizardry, an epic of pre-historic California, or an account of the

great fire, preferably in prose, for, "this is not an age of poetry, anyway." Alas, poor Sterling!—damned alike for what he wrote and what he didn't write. Truly, there are persons whom one may not hope to please.

It should in fairness be said that Mrs. Atherton confesses herself no critic of poetry—the only person, apparently, who is not—but pronounces Mr. Sterling a "recluse" who "needs to see more and read less." From a pretty long acquaintance with him I should say that this middle-aged man o' the world is as little "reclusive" as any one that I know, and has seen rather more of life than is good for him. And I doubt if he would greatly gain in mental stature by unreading Mrs. Atherton's excellent novels.

Sterling's critics are not the only persons who seem a bit blinded by the light of his genius: Mr. Joaquin Miller, a born poet and as great-hearted a man as ever lived, is not quite able to "place" him. He says that this "titanic, magnificent" poem is "classic" "in the Homeric, the Miltonic sense." "A Wine of Wizardry" is not "classic" in the sense in which scholars use that word. It is all color and fire and movement, with nothing of the cold simplicity and repose of the Grecian ideal. Nor is it Homeric, nor in the Miltonic vein. It is in no vein but the author's own; in the entire work is only one line suggesting the manner of another poet—the last in this passage:

Who leads from hell his whitest queens, arrayed
In chains so heated at their master's fire
That one new-damned had thought their bright attire
Indeed were coral, till the dazzling dance
So terribly that brilliance shall enhance.

That line, the least admirable in the poem, is purely Byronic. Possibly Mr. Miller meant that Sterling's work is like Homer's and Milton's, not in manner, but in excellence; and it is.

Mr. Sterling's critics may at least claim credit for candor. For cause of action, as the lawyers say, they aver his use of strange, unfamiliar words. Now this is a charge that any man should be ashamed to make; first, because it is untrue; second, because it is a confession of ignorance.

There are not a half-dozen words in the poem that are not in common use by good authors, and none that any man should not blush to say that he does not understand. The objection amounts to this: that the poet did not write down to the objector's educational level—did not adapt his work to "the meanest capacity." Under what obligation was he to do so? There are men whose vocabulary does not exceed a few hundred words; they know not the meaning of the others because they have not the thought that the others express. Shall these Toms, Dicks and Harrys of the slums and cornfields set up their meager acquirements as metes and bounds beyond which a writer shall not go? Let them stay upon their reservations. There are poets enough, great poets, too, whom they can partly understand; that is, they can understand the simple language, the rhymes, the meter—everything but the poetry. There are orders of poetry, as there are orders of architecture. Because a Grecian temple is beautiful shall there be no Gothic cathedrals? By the way, it is not without significance that Gothic architecture was first so called in derision, the Goths having no architecture. It was named by the Deacon Harveys of the period.

The passage that has provoked this class of critics to the most shameless feats of self-exposure is this:

Infernal rubrics, sung to Satan's might,
Or chanted to the Dragon in his gyre.

Upon this they have expended all the powers of ridicule belonging to those who respect nothing because they know nothing. A person of light and leading in their bright band [here follows a foot-note, naming Mr. Arthur Brisbane] says of it:

"We confess that we had never before heard of a 'gyre.' Looking it up in the dictionary, we find that it means a gyration, or a whirling round. Rubrics chanted to a dragon while he was whirling ought to be worth hearing."

Now, whose fault is it that this distinguished journalist had never heard of a gyre? Certainly not the poet's. And whose that in very sensibly looking it up he suffered himself to be so misled by the lexicographer as to think it a

gyration, a whirling round? Gyre means, not a gyration, but the path of the gyration, an orbit. And has the poor man no knowledge of a dragon in the heavens?—the constellation Draco, to which, as to other stars, the magicians of old chanted incantations? A peasant is not to be censured for his ignorance, but when he glories in it and draws its limits as a dead line for his betters he is the least pleasing of all the beasts of the field.

An amusing instance of the commonplace mind's inability to understand anything having a touch of imagination is found in a criticism of the now famous lines:

The blue-eyed vampire, sated at her feast,
Smiles bloodily against the leprous moon.

"Somehow," says the critic, who, naturally, is a book-reviewer, "one does not associate blue eyes with a vampire." Of course it did not occur to him that this was doubtless the very reason why the author chose the epithet—if he thought of anybody's conception but his own. "Blue-eyed" connotes beauty and gentleness; the picture is that of a lovely, fair-haired woman with the telltale blood about her lips. Nothing could be less horrible; nothing more terrible. As vampires do not really exist, everyone is at liberty, I take it, to conceive them under what outward and visible aspect he will; but this gentleman, having standardized the vampire, naturally resents any departure from the type—his type. I fancy he requires goggle-eyes, emitting flame and perhaps smoke, a mouth well garnished with tusks—long claws, and all the other appurtenances that make the conventional Chinese dragon so awful that one naturally wishes to meet it and kick it.

Between my mind and the minds of those whom Mr. Sterling's daring incursions into the realm of the unreal do not affect with a keen artistic delight there is nothing in common—except a part of my vocabulary. I cannot hope to convince nor persuade them. Nevertheless, it is no trouble to point out that their loud pretense of being "shocked" by some of his fancies is a singularly foolish one. We are not shocked by the tragic, the terrible, even the ghastly, in literature and art. We do not flee from the

theater when a tragedy is enacting—the murder of Duncan and the sleeping grooms—the stabbing and poisoning in “Hamlet.” We listen without discomposure to the beating to death of Nancy Sykes behind the scenes. The Ancient Mariner’s dead comrades rise and pull at the ropes without disturbing the reader; even the “slimy things” “crawl with legs upon a slimy sea” and we do not pitch the book into the fire. Dante’s underworld, with all its ingenious horrors, page after page of them, are accounted pretty good reading—at least Dante is accounted a pretty good poet. No one stands forth to affirm his distress when Homer’s hero declares that

Swarms of specters rose from deepest hell
With bloodless visage and with hideous yell.
They scream, they shriek; sad groans and dismal sounds
Stun my scared ears and pierce Hell’s utmost bounds.

Literature is full of pictures of the terrible, the awful, the ghastly, if you please; hardly a great author but has given them to us in prose or verse. They shock nobody, for they produce no illusion, not even on the stage, or the canvases of Vereshchagin. If they did they would be without artistic value.

But it is the fashion to pretend to be horrified—when the terrible thing is new and by an unfamiliar hand. The Philistine who accepts without question the horrors of Dante’s Hell professes himself greatly agitated when Sterling’s

Satan, yawning on his brazen seat,
Fondles a screaming thing his fiends have flayed.

In point of fact, the poor Philistine himself yawns as he reads about it; he is not shocked at all. It is comprehensible how there may be such a thing as a mollycoddle, but how one can pretend to be a mollycoddle when one is not—that must be accepted as the most surprising hypocrisy that we have the happiness to know about.

Having affirmed the greatness of Mr. Sterling, I am austere-ly reminded by a half hundred commentators, some of whom profess admiration for “A Wine of Wizardry,”

that a single poem, of whatever excellence, does not establish the claim. Like nearly all the others, these gentlemen write without accuracy, from a general impression. They overlook the circumstance that I pointed out a book by Sterling, published several years ago, entitled *The Testimony of the Suns, and Other Poems*. What, then, becomes of the "single poem" sneer? To its performers nothing that they have not seen exists.

That book is dedicated to me—a fact that has been eagerly seized upon by still another class of critics to "explain" my good opinion of its author; for nothing is so welcome to our literary hill-tribes as a chance to cheat by ascription of a foul motive. But it happens, unhappily for the prosperity of their hope, that the dedication was made in gratitude for my having already set the crown of praise upon its author's head. I will quote the first lines of the dedication, not only in proof of this, but to show the noble seriousness and sincerity with which a great poet regards his ministry at the altar of his art:

Ah! glad to thy decree I bow,
From whose unquestioned hand did fall,
Beyond a lesser to recall,
The solemn laurels on my brow.

I tremble at the splendid weight.
To my unworth 'tis given to know
How dread the charge I undergo
Who claims the holy Muse as mate.

It is to be hoped that Mr. Sterling's reverent attitude toward his art has suffered no abatement from his having been thrown to the swine for allegiance to an alien faith hateful to his countrymen.

CHAPTER XXIII

PLAGIARISM

I

WHILE plagiarism is a charge easily brought, said Ambrose Bierce, and all authors worth their salt are confronted with the accusation, it should not be made lightly.

"We should remember that we are all plagiarists if we are pleased to attenuate the term, for we necessarily make use of the thoughts and the language of others, and cannot write even the letter *A* without plagiarizing. We are the sum of innumerable periods of barbarism and of civilization, and can utter no single word, spoken or written, that has not been used by others. And who is to trace any thought to its genesis? It cannot be done.

"Yet, the thief of literature is the meanest of all rogues, and is the most contemptible; unfortunately, too, he is legion. His opportunities these days are boundless, and he thinks the probability of detection so slight that he can steal with impunity. He is wrong: despite the billions of words that are printed every year, the wilful plagiarist is bound to be found out, and quickly. The sad thing is that the crime larceny of what one writes is now so nearly universal that unless the plagiarist is peculiarly barefaced he is held in no disesteem; however brazen the outrage, he is soon forgiven, his crime soon forgotten."

Bierce was probably plagiarized more than any other author of his time. The plagiarists were the meanest of the species, too, and utterly without conscience. For years at a time the ink was hardly dry on the printed page of his work

before his very language was stolen, word for word, and reprinted either below or above the signature of some rogue. Actually, there would be a dozen or more thieves at a time, and they would get to quarreling among themselves, each accusing the other of plagiarism, the while stealing even Bierce's inventions of literary processes, giving to them synonymous titles, then publishing Bierce's work either verbatim or slightly altered. *Prattle* and *The Devil's Dictionary* were but two sources of theft of scores that might be cited. Bierce was turning out hundreds of marvelous epigrams—centuryfuls a year—and these would be sent by plagiarists as their own to different newspapers and magazines in Europe, there printed, and later republished in America and credited to the plagiarists. Editors of American newspapers and magazines would cull Bierce's epigrams as they were printed, with his name signed to them, strike out his signature, and put *Anonymous* in its place. This was done by the editors of some of the most reputable newspapers and magazines published on this continent, so venomous were they in their hatred of the satirist who had lampooned them for years. Hosts of European writers, whose names are now household words throughout the world, ruthlessly robbed him, taking his words from his pen as fast as they were written.

II

Bierce was to live to see the day when the most brazen plagiarism was no longer news, but was taken as a matter of course. I recall discussing with him an article that I was soon to publish in *Neale's Monthly*, which was brought out in that magazine in the issue of November, 1913, exposing an example of as outrageous and as flagrant a plagiarism as had ever come to his knowledge, or to mine. The article, written by Miss Lily Young Cohen, an associate editor, was

entitled *Justin Huntly McCarthy, Plagiarist*, and proved beyond the possibility of controversion that McCarthy the younger had translated into English—combined and condensed, but otherwise a close translation—the two novels by the great French *romancier* Paul Féval, entitled *Le Petit Parisien* and *Le Chevalier de Lagardère*, and these two translations had been published as a book by Harper & Brothers, with a title-page as follows:

THE DUKE'S MOTTO
A MELODRAMA

BY

JUSTIN HUNTLY MCCARTHY

AUTHOR OF

"SERAPHICA," "IF I WERE KING," "THE PROUD PRINCE," ETC., ETC.

New York and London

HARPER & BROTHERS, *Publishers*

MCMVIII

As soon as the article was submitted to me, I put Harper & Brothers on notice by letter, exposing the fraud. That firm not only did not withdraw the book from publication, but continued to print edition after edition, and I am informed that the volume is still offered for sale by the publishers.

It so happened that McCarthy was soon to be entertained by a prominent club in New York City, where he was to be fêted and given lodgment upon his visit to America. Just before his arrival, or about that time, I had the magazine containing marked copies of the article sent to prominent members of the club. Not the least difference was made: he was fêted just the same. Marked copies of the article were also sent to five hundred of the leading newspapers and magazines of the United States; but not one gave it the slightest attention in print, though reviewing other contents of the magazine.

It all came about as Bierce had predicted in his conversation with me: the offense plagiarism had become so common that it was no longer news, no longer reprehensible, but rather a clever trick, to be applauded: the charge was ignored by the public press.

The article, if untrue, was clearly libelous, and subjected its author and the publishers to an action for libel. No such action was threatened; none was taken.

Those who find plagiarists hateful will be glad to learn that librarians did not hold the view of literary thieves that was taken by the editors of newspapers and magazines and by club members eager to lionize any prominent foreign author. They gave to *Neale's Monthly* of November, 1913, a permanent place in their libraries, where rare books and documents are stored, and, in addition, entered full descriptions of the article in their public card index systems. As an example, I mention the New York Public Library, where this particular infamy is embalmed for centuries to come.

"The doubt naturally arises as to whether Justin Huntly McCarthy is the author of anything that bears his name," said Bierce.

Says Miss Cohen in her article: "As a sop to his conscience, Mr. McCarthy precedes his plagiaristic enterprise with a dedication to the late playwright, Victorien Sardou, —a dedication written, by the bye, in impeccable French, in which he says in part. . . ."

Then follows the dedication in French. Let Miss Cohen continue:

Now, since we too translate almost as fluently as does Mr. McCarthy, we will put into English those same words. Here they are:

"Here is a melodrama, the last of several English melodramas having Lagardère as their hero. Words take the place of stage business, words take the place of scenery, of

costumes, and of accessories. Yet, after all, this *pastiche* is only a play, and not a novel. . . . For a long time I have known, thanks to M. Jules Claretie, that you were the true creator of that paragon of manhood, Lagardère, the peer of d'Artagnan, the peer of Cyrano, almost the peer of Roland and of Oliver."

Now, on its face this has a very honest look to anyone familiar with the tongue in which the "dédicace" is written. Most gratefully and gracefully does the author (?) of "The Duke's Motto" acknowledge his obligation to his master, Sardou, for pressing the button that touched off the Englishman's melodrama. Naturally, anyone would suppose that Mr. McCarthy had taken a play by the French dramatist and converted it into a connected story, beautified by his own magical word, style, and expression. However, anyone who neglected to read that dedication, but confined himself to the statement on the title-page, would believe "The Duke's Motto" to be an original piece of work, conceived and written by Justin Huntly McCarthy. This idea would be still further strengthened by the words on the neat little paper pinafore of the book, which say that the novel is "a dazzling drama of adventure in the time of Louis XIII of France, with a compelling love story."

But "The Duke's Motto" is neither of these things,—it is neither a "novelized" drama nor an original melodrama. It is simply a condensation and translation of two French novels of unconscionable length,—novels that were popular in France several years before the earth could claim Mr. McCarthy as an inhabitant.

"La Grande Encyclopédie," published at Paris in 1893, after telling of Féval's success as a novelist, says: "Le théâtre lui avait été moins favorable que le roman; néanmoins *Le Bossu* (1863) dont M. Victorien Sardou avait fourni le scénario eut un succès prolongué et réitéré suivi, trois ans plus tard, d'une polémique fort aigre entre les deux écrivains (*Figaro*, 1866)." Or, in English: "With plays he was less successful than with the novel; nevertheless, 'Le Bossu' (1863) for which M. Victorien Sardou prepared the scenario, had a prolonged and repeated suc-

cess, followed three years later by a very bitter controversy between the two authors. (*Figaro*, 1866.)"

However, it must be remembered that Féval's novel from which "Le Bossu" was drawn was written in 1858, so that the novelist in all probability simply called upon Sardou's knowledge of stagecraft for purposes of dramatization. Be that as it may, any charge of plagiarism against Féval by Sardou (Sardou, whose greatest comedy "Les Pattes de Mouche"—"The Scrap of Paper"—is deliberately taken from Poe's "Purloined Letter") could have little weight, since in almost any biography of the late French dramatist may be found passages like the following from the "Dictionnaire Larousse":

"Il lui est arrivé d'avoir recours à des réminiscences, à des emprunts qui lui ont valu de vives attaques dont il s'est défendu dans un livre intitulé: *Mes Plagiats*." Which passage translated means: "It often happened that he had recourse to imitations and copies which brought upon him vigorous attacks, against which he entered his defense in a book entitled 'My Plagiarisms.'"

But even if Féval did steal from Sardou the scenario or brief outline of a drama and then did base upon it his two great novels, Mr. McCarthy has stolen Féval's language, his situations, his characterizations, and all else, even including the highly involved plot that it is unthinkable to believe was revealed by a mere scenario.

Furthermore, if Féval's two novels were written word for word by Sardou, yet is McCarthy's offense none the less, for in that event he stole from Sardou.

In his "Dédicace," McCarthy uses the French word *pastiche*. Perhaps he thought this a safe word to use, since it is almost untranslatable. "Yet, after all, this *pastiche* is only a play," and so forth. If his accuser should say that here *pastiche* means "presentation," McCarthy might say that he meant the word to mean "imitation." Very well, "imitation" the word shall be.

But "The Duke's Motto" is no imitation; it is no adaptation; it is purely a condensed translation. And this translation, meant for readers of English, has nothing to show in English that it is an imitation, an adaptation, or a

translation. To the contrary, McCarthy informs us in plain English on the title-page that he is the author of this book and of other books. Besides, in the "Dédicace" he shows that he did not mean the word *pastiche* to mean imitation, adaptation, or translation, for he says therein: "Here is a melodrama that I have written. . . . I did it for Lewis Waller." He does not say that he either imitated Sardou or translated his work. Indeed, he could not very well claim that he had translated a play by Sardou, to say nothing of a brief scenario, inasmuch as "The Duke's Motto" is a long novel.

But neither Sardou nor anybody else appears to have charged that Féval used Sardou's words. We charge that McCarthy translated Féval's words faithfully,—so faithfully at times that his English suffered.

By the bye, one naturally inquires, Why was the dedication to Sardou written in French? We think we know why. But doubtless McCarthy would say that Sardou, being a Frenchman, and a dedication being a personal matter, in compliment to Sardou the dedication was written in the Frenchman's own language.

The controversy between Féval and Sardou does not enter into the situation at all. Before dismissing the matter, however, we will repeat that Sardou was frequently accused of plagiarism; Féval but once, and then by Sardou. Just why so great a writer as Féval should have stolen from so inferior a dramatist as Sardou is not apparent.

Then, again; if Sardou did actually write such a play, and if Justin McCarthy did honestly try to turn that play into an English novel, why did he in many instances take the very captions of his chapters from "Le Petit Parisien" and its sequel "Le Chevalier de Lagardère," both novels by Paul Féval?

As Bierce read the manuscript of Miss Cohen's article he would pause again and again to comment on its high literary excellence, its invulnerability, its merciless exposure of a fraud, shaking his head sadly the while, in sorrow that American letters had reached so low an estate that the article would puzzle our critics, who would observe, What's

it all about?—if McCarthy wants to make a little money out of Lagardère, why not? “No, Neale; McCarthy will thrive under the charge!”

Let us take a close look at this word *pasticcio*, in Italian, and *pastiche* in French. The Standard Dictionary defines the Italian word as follows:

n. [It.] 1. *Mus.* An olio made up of fragments of other works connected so as to form a complete work. 2. (1) An artist's design copied in a different art or employed in a way foreign to the original. (2) A work made of fragments patched together or having missing parts supplied.

A translation of the definition of *pastiche* as it appears in *Dictionnaire Illustré de la Lanque Française* (Larousse) is as follows:

n. m. (ital *pasticcio*). A painting in which one imitates the manner of another painter; a work in which one has imitated the style and manner of some celebrated author; an opera composed of well-known pieces by different masters.”

Robin Hood, Cyrano, Galahad, Godiva, Lancelot, numerous others of reality or fable, are legitimate literary material, and the vast literature that has been written about each as a whole, creating the character as known to us, can be legitimately used by any author; and when he makes use of that literature, or the character, as already created, and by his pen adds a fable of his own, he has written a *pastiche*, legitimate, and a work of art to the extent that he has done his work well. He is not to be accused of plagiarism. But when he takes Rostand's drama, *Cyrano*, for example, and renders a close translation of it—as close as he can make—and puts it out as his own creation, under a title other than Rostand's, he has not made a *pastiche*: he is a literary thief pure and simple, and the pillory is his proper place. By no

stretch of a diseased imagination can the word *pastiche* be so attenuated as to cover the plagiarist who condenses two long novels of the French language, connects them in a more or less clumsy fashion, then translates his condensation into English, gives it a title utterly foreign to either of the original novels, and on the title-page labels it an original work of his own. Calling it a *pastiche* in a dedication published in the French language in a book written in the English language, presumably for readers not versed in the French tongue, does not make the translation a *pastiche*, but it remains exactly what it is: a plagiarism, the larceny of a writer's work, and stamps the thief as a particularly low knave, admitting that he has substituted mendacity for mentality.

III

I began this chapter by indirectly quoting Bierce to the effect that the charge of plagiarism should not be lightly brought and that all authors of worth are accused of literary theft. He would point out that he himself had not escaped the charge. Some there were who said that his *The Damned Thing*, while not a plagiarism, was imitative of Fitz-James O'Brien's *What Was It?* and that Bierce's story could not have been written if O'Brien's had not first seen the light. Bierce told me that he had never heard of either O'Brien or his story until many years after *The Damned Thing* was published.

"But," said he, "I make the point illustrative of the views I hold on this whole matter of plagiarism, that, even if I had read O'Brien's story, even if I had committed it to memory, I could not justly be charged with imitativeness, to say nothing of plagiarism, for both O'Brien and I used common literary material, common to all mankind ever since the days of tribal life and savagery. Do the admirers of

O'Brien suppose that the concept of an invisible monster was first born from the mind of that young genius? The fear of the invisible is instinctive even in brute animals. There may be a slight similarity in the two stories; there is: each tells of an invisible creature of murderous demonstrations. But there the similarity ends. The literary processes are unlike. I am quite certain that if my story had been published before O'Brien was born I would not have accused him of imitateness, and certainly not of plagiarism, in the writing of his tale."

O'Brien, an Irish gentleman, inherited considerable wealth, which he proceeded to squander. Then he came to America, in 1852, at the age of twenty-four, and, as a writer of short stories, as a dramatist, and as a journalist, displayed nothing short of genius. He enlisted in the Seventh Regiment, New York Volunteers, in 1861, and went to the front. In 1862 he was severely wounded, gangrene set in, and he died. Had he but lived the allotted time of man! But he died at the age of thirty-four, leaving to the world a few short-stories, one of which, *The Diamond Lens*, is among the greatest ever written in any language. That story has probably been more frequently republished in the English language than any other, by any author. Truly it is a masterpiece. Next in point of merit, infused with genius, is the story entitled *What Was It?*

But *What Was It?* great as it is in its conception, is not the work of a master-craftsman. It teems with the crudities of a genius who is yet serving his technical novitiate as a writer. Bierce's *The Damned Thing*, on the other hand, is the work of a craftsman who has reached the zenith of his artistry; and one has but to read the two stories at a sitting to find apparent, beyond any doubt whatsoever, that *The Damned Thing* is incomparably the greater—in conception, in style, in power, and in verisimilitude. Bierce's damned

thing surely existed: so did the thing that caused O'Brien to enquire as to what it was; but here is an essential difference: O'Brien's creature became so unreal as to cease to exist in the mind of the reader, while the reader is held to the last word of Bierce's story, a-tremble, seized with a mortal fear, with loathing unutterable, and expects momentarily to be killed by the damned thing itself. Nothing in all the literature of which I have any knowledge is superior to *The Damned Thing*, in craftsmanship, in the art of the short-story. Bierce could not have written *What Was It?*—he was too much the artist; O'Brien could not have written *The Damned Thing*: his technique was too immature. Nevertheless, *What Was It?* is a great short-story despite its imperfections, and tends to prove Bierce's contention that literature may be great despite its faults.

IV

Particularly flagrant was the misuse of Bierce's book entitled *Write It Right*. A woman named Learned—a Mrs. Lelia Sprague Learned—began a series of articles in the book supplement of *The New York Times*, probably intending to reprint the entire volume *Write It Right*, crediting herself with the authorship. She did manage to make use of a considerable part of the book before steps were taken to force her to desist. Several of the articles had been published before my attention was called to them, when I immediately wrote to the editor of the book supplement, protesting, and enclosing with my letter numerous typewritten pages, showing in parallel columns the use of *Write It Right* verbatim. She showed some ingenuity too, for she would take Bierce's language in the definition of one word and incorporate it as an illustration of her own, applicable to some other word. Thus, in *Write It Right* appear the following items:

Laundry. Meaning a place where clothing is washed, this word cannot mean, also, clothing sent there to be washed.

Roomer for Lodger. See *Bedder* and *Mealer*—if you can find them.

Settee for Settle. This word belong to the peasantry of speech.

Says Mrs. Learned in her article entitled *Slipshod English*, published in the *New York Times Book Review*, July 23, 1911:

The farmer who has a "settee" on his "pi-azza," instead of a settle, will doubtless speak of taking "roomers," though I'm sure that he wouldn't say "mealers" or "bedders."

Many a "city-bred" lady who hesitates to speak of "soiled linen" will ask her maid if the "laundry" has been sent. Now "laundry" meaning the place where clothing is washed, it can hardly mean the clothes.

A member of the editorial staff of the *Times* called to see me, and together we went through the book *Write It Right* and the articles by the Learned woman that had already been published. He had to admit the truth of my charge, but said nobody connected with the *Times* was culpable; and doubtless that was true—up to that point. But—publication of the series continued, with the knowledge and consent of the editorial management: certainly with knowledge and consent, since the attorneys for the Neale house had taken the matter up with the attorneys for the *Times*, in addition to my letter of protest and to my interview with one of the editors of the book supplement. The outrage continuing, I wrote to the United States District Attorney, Henry A. Wise, suggesting criminal prosecution of all the culprits. Receiving from him a cordial reply, expressing his willingness to proceed upon verification of the facts as I had stated them, I wrote to Bierce of my willingness to take both civil

and criminal action. At first he favored both proceedings, but later thought that it would be difficult to obtain a judgment against a woman on any charge that might be brought, and thought that any action against the *Times* would be futile. If right in this view, we would both be put to considerable expense and annoyance, and thereafter all he wrote could be pirated with impunity, he thought. I quote from his letter to George Sterling about the matter, as follows:

WASHINGTON, D. C.,
July 31, 1911.

DEAR GEORGE,

Thank you for the "Times" review. My publisher, Neale, who was here last evening, is about "taking action" against that concern for infringement of his copyright in my little book, "Write It Right." The wretches have been serving it up to their readers for several weeks as the work of a woman named Learned. Repeatedly she uses my very words—whole passages of them. They refused even to confess the misdeeds of their contributrix, and persist in their sin. So they will have to fight.

I give it as my deliberated opinion, based on many years of observation and on my experience as a publisher, and on my conversations with other publishers, that authors and publishers in the United States are essentially without protection against piracy and plagiarism. I have never known an instance of the criminal provisions of the copyright laws having been enforced, of a conviction ever having been obtained; and, while millions, perhaps billions, have been made by plagiarists and pirates, the recoveries in civil actions instituted by publishers and authors in efforts to vindicate their rights have been insufficient to defray more than a small part of the costs of such actions.

These days authorship is among the better paid vocations. Yet, authors are at the mercy of every plagiarist and pirate of the thousands who daily batten upon them. The writing

and the vending of literature, with its co-ordinate branches, is high in the scale of American industries. Hundreds of millions of dollars are invested in this industry, by foresters, by proprietors of paper mills, and by manufacturers of machinery; by printers, binders, and manufacturers of cloth and of ink; by type-founders; by dramatists and actors; by the owners of buildings that house manufacturing plants and the drama; and tens of thousands of families of compositors and printers, dramatists and actors, rely upon this industry for their livelihood. The welfare of hundreds of thousands of our people is dependent upon authors and publishers; yet, few authors and publishers attempt to protect their property rights, and the few who bring civil actions get nothing for their pains. Here is the great unprotected American industry. Both publishers and authors countenance—yea, encourage!—plagiarism and piracy by their attitude of *laissez-faire*.

v

“Quite properly,” Bierce once said to me, “there is no copyright in thought; the human mind is untrammelled by copyright laws. Nor would it be possible thus to limit the horizon of imagination. It is the expression of thought, the words in which it is clothed, that is properly subject to copyright. Nor can thought be plagiarized. I must keep at it: Who may lay claim to an original thought? Can any man truthfully say that any idea is peculiar to him, has been originated by him, when it is impossible for him to determine what is in the minds of one-and-a-half billions of people now living, to say nothing of what was generated by the brains of the countless billions now dead? All thought is everybody’s property, to seize—if he can.

“The physical universe is not subject to copyright. As material for literature, it is every man’s property. If then,

an author charges plagiarism against a brother craftsman due to his brother's use of facts (not the words) contained in a geographical work, say, as data in the construction of a work of fiction, the charge will not lie. The imaginative writer, whether of prose or verse, is entitled to draw on every scientist, geographer, and historian, and on all other non-fiction writers, for facts; and he is not obligated to give them one line of credit. But he may not use without credit words in combination as used by any other writer than himself. When, however, an historian invades another historian's field, or a scientist invades some other scientist's field, he must have a care, and give credit to sources as well as to direct and to indirect quoted matter. And so on: every man to his own intellectual pursuit. The test is not difficult; nobody ever yet stole anything that he was not aware of the larceny. The literary thief's awareness is acute; his morality, atrophied.

"While the plagiarist is as well aware of his theft as is the victim, not so the public generally. Here the severest test that the reader may apply is that of similarity of phraseology. If the combination of words is consecutive and identical, the work belongs to the man who first wrote it, and the culprit stands naked. But there are many other tests, conclusive, and each sufficient to detect the thief. These are readily applied by intelligent readers, while any literary craftsman worthy of his bread usually discovers a plagiarism at a glance, provided he has read the work plagiarized. Fortunately, plagiarists are usually clumsy fellows, so foolish as to reveal by their own original matter their utter inability to have written the stolen matter. Inequalities of thought, phraseology, and other characteristics of style are not to be imitated successfully by the usual rascal. Yet, some of these rogues are clever, and are good writers, too— 'a

harmonious blender,' one of them recently unblushingly characterized himself while speaking with me."

"What," I asked one day, "is your opinion of the author who plagiarizes himself?"

"Said by you publishers to be a knave," Bierce replied; "and frequently he is, particularly in his relations with publishers. But—name the author who does not plagiarize himself! No such person is possible of existence. Whether he be fraudulent, depends. He is imitative of himself in phraseology, in characterization, in plots—in everything. Shall I qualify this by the use of another word than imitative?—which would imply deliberation, a conscious repetition of his previous work. Perhaps an author seldom, if ever, intentionally sets down in exactly the same language anything that he has previously written, although he may write out a thought previously expressed, and do so properly—for emphasis, say. He may even write with propriety a book in which he makes use of the mental processes developed in some previous book, or books, that he has written.

"The publishers who profess to hold in disesteem the author who is imitative of himself, I observe, hold their indignation in leash so long as they publish the imitative books; but when the author switches to another publisher—ah, then the chain of restraint is broken, and indignation unbridled joins with vituperation in a mad rush. The publisher is willing enough to supply his trade with thirty volumes of the same book, by different titles, so long as he is the publisher, and the readers, instead of being indignant, actually refuse to read anything else—they insist upon authors repeating themselves.

"This observation leads me to say that the versatile writer is bound to starve. The public will have none of him—not while he is alive. The multitude demands of all authors that they repeat themselves; the masses are offended,

outraged, and clamor for the return of their money when the author perpetrates the fraud of something new. They are right: they have been defrauded: something they had not intended to purchase has been substituted. So it is with dramatists, with actors, with painters, with sculptors—with all artists. They must not be versatile, not even within their limited range of activity, for even in a restricted sphere sameness must be multiplied by sameness.”

“Once more back to plagiarism,” said I; “and let me have your views of the theft of plots from writers of fiction.”

“By which you mean, I take it, the plagiarism of plots that really have not been plagiarized at all.

“First, let me say, plots are readily conceived by imaginative writers, and although literature affords relatively few examples of really great plots, to me this is not surprising, for the plot is of first importance to the lesser authors only. To be sure, there must be a story, a tale to relate, something to write about; but so negligible did Shakespeare, for example, hold the plot, that he largely drew upon facts and wove his imagination on the web of actual occurrences. Nor did he hesitate to take up the plots of others and use them as his own, without credit.”

“Upon the theory,” I suggested, “to paraphrase a later writer: Though old the plot by others drest, ’tis his at last who weaves it best.”

“Partly, perhaps; but there were probably other excellent reasons. Why so great a creative genius as Shakespeare should not have invented his own plots, was best known to him; but, as he never passed on the secret to me, I am free to surmise that he was lazy—and as reprehensible as he was slothful. Theft is no more excusable when perpetrated by a Shakespeare than is the crime of larceny when committed by *Jim the Penman*.

“Plots seem to be in the air. We both know of innumer-

able current instances of themes worked out in detail that are so closely alike as to be almost identical. Yet, the different authors, writing simultaneously, widely separated, unknown to one another, some of them writing for the first time, could not have stolen from one another, all stealing the same thing. In some instances this may be accounted for by the author's making use of the same news item, public property, possessed by everybody. Then the story really is his at last who says it best.

"In other instances, similarity of plots of current fiction may be attributed to the trend of events. A great many persons reach the same conclusion at the same time. This is notably true of scientists. Wallace, Darwin, Winwood Reade, widely separated, not in close contact with one another even by mail, simultaneously worked out essentially the same theory of the evolution of man. Each disclaimed credit, and was willing enough to attribute the discovery to either of the other discoverers. None thought that he had been pirated.

"So indifferent am I to the value of plots—although I hold them essential to prose fiction—that I would not be reluctant to tell a dozen good writers my plot of a projected story and say to them, 'Take it, here it is!' knowing full well that the stories when written would be essentially different. The integrity of my tale would not be affected at all. 'Tis his at last who says it best."

VI

Asked Bierce of me: "Neale, to what do you attribute this indifference of the public to the property rights of authors and publishers, that public opinion does not protect them, that judges and juries are reluctant to enforce such rights, that civil actions and criminal prosecutions end disastrously to the plaintiffs, that they are left unprotected and

without redress?" I had given the matter considerable thought.

"Since time immemorial," I replied, "the public has recognized no property right in literature. Throughout all civilizations, writers have freely given away all they have written—until recently. In Egypt, in Israel, in Greece, in Rome, in India, in Persia, in all the countries of Europe until recent years, what a man said orally and what he wrote was public property, and none among writers seems to have given a thought to the pecuniary worth of his utterances. He would have been as greatly astonished, if the suggestion had been made that he charge for his words, as a housewife would be if one should hint that she charge for the advice she shrieks to her neighbors. It was all as free as 'sass' and 'friendly' counsel. The poet would have been insulted by the suggestion that he charge for his poem. Was not his song as free as the lark's?"

"So the public of our own time has inherited the belief that all literature is free. As an author, as a publisher, I know that the public thinks even books are free, that they cost nothing to produce, that it is simply a courtesy due an author and a publisher to suggest that a complimentary copy of the book be forwarded either postpaid or by express to anybody on request. I seem to recall that one great author not removed from me by a thousand miles once wrote, and published what he wrote, that the publisher gave the author ten per cent and kept ninety per cent for his own profit. So he wrote in his ignorance, before he met me, on the assumption that literature depends from trees like wild fruit, to be plucked by any passing wayfarer: that it costs publishers nothing to make and to sell books.

"Copyright laws are of no avail when judges and jurors are of the ineradicable belief that literature is without pecuniary worth."

CHAPTER XXIV

DICTA AND COMMENTARIA

I

IN this biography I draw but little upon Bierce's written words, either as published in *The Collected Works* or omitted from that compilation, assuming, as I do, that what he has published is now either accessible to my readers or in time will be, and that all ultimately will be available to posterity. When I do use a few of his many letters as written to me and to others, or his published works, they are directly quoted, with credits, and the circumstances of their composition explained. If, then, any of the substance of these literary dicta can be found in any of his published work, or in any of the letters he wrote, the fact is not remembered by me.

Throughout this volume, in quoting Bierce, with the exceptions noted at the time, I have purposely avoided duplicating his published expressions of opinion, preferring to make use of his informal oral discourse, much of which conveyed his ripest judgment and reflected his rich experiences. In his unguarded, intimate, spontaneous observations there was rare wisdom, expressed in language that, if published as spoken, would greatly enrich the literature of our era. My memory holds his exact language to a considerable degree, and what I set down in this volume as being attributed to him is always in his spirit and is often largely in his characteristic phraseology.

Many of Bierce's brief oral comments were pungent; some were epigrammatic; many revealed previous profound meditation. Lack of space prevents my inclusion in this vol-

ume of more than a few of these brief but critical summaries. Those that I give are not epigrammatically expressed, and are set down mainly in order to record his conclusions on men and events that at the time he did not care to discuss in detail.

II

Observing the tendency of some writers of dialogue not properly to identify the speaker, Bierce said that, objectionable as is the recurrence of "he said," "she retorted," "the duke replied," and "his mother remarked," there was but one way by which the wearisome monotony might be avoided, and that was by the dramatic form. We were discussing the manuscript of my novel entitled *The Betrayal*, and he was criticising my failure in some instances to establish the identity of the speaker at the opening of a speech in dialogue, particularly in the beginning of the story, when the diction of the characters, their mental processes, and their peculiarities of expression had not been fixed in the mind of the reader. The writer should take pains—and this without marring his story—to establish at the outset the personalities of his characters. As little violence as possible should be done to the law of economy of attention as promulgated by Herbert Spencer.

I pointed to some of his own dialogue, in a book of his at hand, and showed that he had not identified the speaker in numerous instances until a long speech had terminated. Said I: "If not essential at the opening, why necessary at all? The context is sufficient identification. Why, then, at the end of a long paragraph, do you tag on, 'she said?' Furthermore, why at the end of another long speech do you add, 'was his rather surly retort?' If the speaker had not shown very plainly that the retort was 'rather surly,' the fault was yours, Major; and if it was perfectly plain that

the retort was somewhat surly, why the superfluous explanation? Why the introduction of a pleonasm?"

His was not the retort courteous; in truth, it was rather surly. Always on the lookout for a slight, even an insult, he probably thought I had implied that he had been guilty of what he had so frequently denounced as being an unpardonable crime—the introduction by short-cut writers of such explanatory and dramatic identification as, "she threw back at him." He objected to the slovenly method of some writers in their misuse of literary marks of identification, with their absurd attempts to reveal the mental processes of their characters, identify the speaker, make known his psychology, and do almost anything else in a single phrase, when the only purpose should have been that of identification. However, I, of course, had had no objection to the addendum "was his rather surly retort" on the ground that the phrase would not be justifiable when made a part of the identification of a speaker. I had had no other purpose than to criticise the repetition of a mental state that had already been shown.

As it seemed to me, Bierce was both right and wrong in his contention in regard to establishing the identity of the speaker; and he did not follow his own dictum in his compositions. The sense of "feeling"—a sense common to all good writers—prompts the revealment of the identity of the speaker when required. He was right as to the tendency of good writers to avoid necessary identification, and, since he terminated his mortal existence, there has been a further trend toward a form neither dramatic nor narrative. In recent prose fiction particularly the reader is left to identify the speakers as best he can, with little or no help from the author; with the result that work is required of the reader that is properly the author's task. But Bierce was partly wrong, for the context frequently sufficiently identifies the

speaker, and redundancy would impede the flow of the narration.

III

Bierce believed the dramatic form the most artistic of all the methods known to him, and the best, saying that it might even be artistically applied to the short-story. He assumed that the great among Greek, Latin, English, and other writers had given due consideration to all the major literary forms now in use, and that many had deliberately selected the dramatic. No doubt, too, they had given consideration to nearly all our modern literary processes—to the short-story and to the novel, for example—and had rejected such molds as casts for their masterpieces. We must assume that Shakespeare had weighed the short-story, which had very nearly reached perfection in Boccaccio's work. Shakespeare preferred to make *The Tempest* a drama, not a novel, not a short-story.

Time, thought Bierce, would prove the dramatic to be the most enduring of literary forms. To be sure, the drama is not popular in our time when it is meant to be read; but its incomparable superiority is shown when it is properly spoken and acted. Who would not sooner pay five dollars to witness the enactment of a play, although affording him pleasure for only two or three hours, than to pay two dollars for a book, containing several times more words, and affording a less degree of pleasure for several days? This would go to show the intrinsic superiority of the dramatic form to any other—in the pleasure given, at any rate, and in its "drawing" properties.

He contended that the dramatic form has a vitality that is lacking in any other; that it is more difficult to write; that the desired effect can be the more readily achieved, and effects produced not otherwise obtainable; that it is the

natural form of expression; that it obviates the necessity of interruptions in order to identify the speaker; that the overwhelming advantage is given to it by acquaintance with the character before he speaks. In any other form, the author, whether of necessity or not, invariably obtrudes his own character in developing the characters of his narration. He does so in part by his own manner in what he causes his puppets to say; and while this is true to an appreciable extent of the dramatic form—since no author can wholly escape from his own personality—it is less true of that form than of any other.

Nevertheless, Bierce himself seldom employed the dramatic mode; but when he did, he wrought with great skill. His dramas, however, were brief, comprising only a few hundred words at most, and were usually based upon an incident, developed in terse dialogue. I rather doubt if Bierce could have written a full-length play. I am morally certain that he never could have written a novel. He had no inclination to write either, being well enough satisfied with his own methods of literary expression.

And why, in my opinion, could Bierce not have written either a play or a novel of full length? Profound thinker though he was, with a highly-organized mind, he seemingly could not hold life's parts together: he saw life in detached particles; he could not gather the different human cells together and make of them a human entity. He could see an individual, a resident of a town, but neither a town nor a city. Bierce would have given no such explanation. How he would have accounted for his failure to become a dramatist, the writer of full-length plays, I am unable to say; but he would truly have expressed his belief that he thought the novel an inferior form of literary expression. His harsh opinion of the novel may be found in his *Collected Works*, and there more than once expressed.

IV

Bierce asked me how I as a publisher accounted for the lack of popularity of the dramatic form of literature as read. Having already given the matter thought, I did not hesitate to say that there were several reasons, chief of which was the necessity of descriptions of place, dress, entrance, exit, and even explanations of the acts of the characters—an endless amount of furniture, obscuring the events enacted. The frequent interruptions of the progress of a narrative, necessary in a drama intended to be read, weary the reader, distract his attention, and force him to note details that are clearly understood when not expressed in simple narrative. There are no such interruptions, divagations, and explanations in drama as acted, the author having worked for the spectator behind the scenes. The drama as acted, then, is the most nearly perfect of all forms of human expression in literature. Needless to insult anybody by saying that the author is thinking for him, taking him along the easiest route, treating him as if he were a child: it is the author's business to do all this: artistry demands of him economy of attention. To all this Bierce said, "I lend an ear," a pet locution of his to denote a tendency to accept the views expressed yet an intent to examine them further.

V

"I object to libraries that are contained in a single volume," Bierce said to me one day. "Even if they are not to be severely condemned, they are to be avoided, for the reason that they subject the users to a number of discomforts. For example, in the use of a single volume comprising all Shakespeare's plays, one holds several pounds in his hand; yet he can read but one play at a time, and that one might weigh but a few ounces if published as a separate. One might be interested in a single article as published in a magazine,

but is required to pay the price of a library of articles in order to read one, and in addition is put to the inconvenience of holding an entire stack in his hand. So with the Bible and with innumerable other libraries that are brought within the confines of a single cover. One seldom wishes to read all the Scriptures at one sitting. The ancient method of publication was the better: then one paid for what he got, and was not required, in order to read a single work, to pay for fifty in which he had no interest in addition to being compelled to support the entire library on his digits. In our time we are particularly harassed, as in the case of a newspaper, although here the difficulty would seem to be insurmountable, since one must wade through that which is not news to him in order to select the items that are."

VI

Continuing, still another day, the theme of the outrages perpetrated upon the public by editors and publishers, he said:

"Advertisements in newspapers and magazines are indefensible, and editors and publishers who permit them are unethical when not downright fraudulent. Why should the reader of an advertisement be compelled to pay for it? Yet, every reader of every advertisement does pay for it, no matter how uninterested he may be, and however unnecessary to him the article advertised. Not only does he pay in part for all commercial announcements that are published in the newspaper or the magazine that he buys, but among them he pays for those that he finds highly objectionable, even propaganda directed at a cause to which he is opposed.

"Literature is supposed to be contained in both newspapers and magazines; infrequently it is to be found in both; yet, facing some noble poem may be the picture of a half-naked woman applying to her teeth some advertised tooth-

paste; above the poem—never below, for the poem is always stuck at the bottom of the page—some advertiser warns us against the dangers of constipation and highly recommends some liver remedy; at the left, above a legend couched in euphemistic language, is a picture of some instrument designed to end the propagation of the human race; at the right, the plan of some fraudulent banker who, with the aid of the editor and the publisher, is endeavoring to filch the savings of some poor widow. What a setting for a poem! Who can read it in an environment of crass indecency and open fraud? But in this setting I must buy the poem, if I am to read it.

"I know of no other article of commerce that I purchase that way. When I buy either a painting or some sculptured figure, neither of which may be better art than is literature, it is not delivered to me desecrated by advertisements. Nobody has been so wicked as to paste handbills on it. In no way is its beauty marred. I can gaze upon it undisturbed, meditate, and view it in surroundings adapted to my mood. No shriek of commerce is heard; there is no obscene picture to make my gorge rise; the firm of Catchem & Cheatem is not apparent: I am alone with my art.

"It is no answer at all when the editor and the publisher say that advertisements enable them to sell the magazine or the newspaper at a small fraction of the charge that otherwise would have to be made. I deny anybody's right to make me an object of charity. I am unwilling that the statue that I wish to buy shall be draped with advertisements in order that it may be sold to me at a price below its intrinsic worth. Likewise, I object to paying for advertisements, particularly when they are offensive to me, in order to read the news, or to obtain literature at a bargain price.

"Our merchants have innumerable means of advertising their wares; they are not obliged to force them upon us by

inappropriate methods. Perhaps Mr. Curtis of the Philadelphia *Saturday Evening Post* when he entertains his friends at dinner has his butler pass around between courses advertisements of lingerie, as being of interest to the ladies; and Dr. Hokum's Favorite Remedy for Rheumatism, as a warning to the elderly gentlemen present; perhaps, after the liqueurs and cigars, Mr. Wrigley is introduced, bearing a tray of Spearmint Chewing Gum, and holding up in one hand his advertisement in *The Saturday Evening Post* that assures us that at least one quid should be chewed after each meal as an aid to digestion. If Mr. Curtis thus conducts his literary banquets, why not his dinner parties in the same way? No doubt he does both in much the same manner; at least, he gives me the right to surmise that he does.

"Perhaps Mr. Curtis will say in extenuation of his literary and social lapses that Mr. Gladstone once remarked that he found the advertisements in American newspapers and magazines the most interesting of the contents. No doubt he did find them so. In this he and I are in accord. However, perhaps it is not the fault of editors and publishers that the 'literature' they provide for their readers as written by highly-paid authors is less well written and is less interesting than are the commercial spiels of the Toms, Dicks, and Harrys of trade."

VII

"If authors only knew at the time they were writing immortal literature that their products in later years would be recognized as masterpieces, how much greater would be their work, how much closer to perfection their every passage! Shakespeare would have done some things that he left undone; he would have undone some things that he had done unworthily, carelessly. Be ye well assured, the mistakes of a writer have nothing to do with the longevity of his

fame. Literature may achieve immortality despite its defects, never because of them; and the pity of it is that once literature has put on immortality the repose of its mortal remains can never be disturbed. With many of the faithful, mortal faults become immortal virtues, and such folk howl in righteous indignation when some man of letters profanely undertakes to correct the diction of—shall I say?—Shakespeare. So ‘the most unkindest cut’ shall ever remain ‘the most unkindest.’ ”

VIII

The mob annoyed Bierce. He lived to see the upstart “poets” roundly denounce Longfellow, and the *vers-libre* writers among them extol Whitman far beyond his deserts—together, to see *hoi polloi* reveal its lack of selectiveness and literary acumen. Longfellow he counted truly great among the poets of the English language of his period. Walt Whitman, a man of low pecuniary standards and practices, who, nevertheless, might have been a poet of first rank regardless of his disregard of the property rights of others—since the immoral may write divinely—he “disesteemed” largely for the reason that the “good” gray poet wrote prose that he falsely labeled verse: termed by latter-day “poets” *vers libre*.

IX

“What matters the title of a book when it is misleading? The book is what it is. If it be valuable, in time it will become known for what it is, and likely will be called by some appropriate title. In hymnology—in fact, in much that is great poetry—the poem is identified not by the title given to it by the author but by its first line. Who cares that the hymn we call “Abide With Me” was a lyric entitled *Evening* by its author? How many know that “The Night Before Christmas” was called *A Visit From St. Nicholas* by

the lawyer who wrote it? Label a book *Lead*, and it will become known as *Gold* if its contents be golden; entitle it *Wisdom*, and it will be called *Rot* if that be the true character of its contents—and centuries will not elapse before the correct title will be applied.”

Bierce was a master in the selection of titles for his own literary work.

X

“Mark Twain is a far greater humorist, a far greater wit, than real men of letters seem to realize. Much of his work is without humor, and lacks wit as well; and, needless to say, his witless humor and his humorless wit are mistaken for pure gold by the vast majority of his readers. He is as likely to live beyond our age as is any of us. *Joan* is probably his greatest single work. I read the story as it was published serially without being able to determine the identity of the author. I was amazed at the fellow’s display of scholarship; faked, of course. But the facts assembled in *Joan*, the knowledge of the events therein chronicled, the deep insight into character there displayed were not faked; and the book stands for what it is: literature of a very high order.”

Bierce recognized in Clemens a fellow-pretender at the time Bierce was a pretender professing a scholarship that he (Bierce) did not then possess, and I am inclined to think that he never credited his old enemy with an educational development that ever evolved into scholarship.

XI

Bierce contended that words with objectionable implications, yet otherwise accurately used, should be avoided when no offensive application was intended, no matter what the source from which the words were derived.

One day we two, while strolling in the streets of Balti-

more, passed the buildings of a famous educational institution, in front of one of which was displayed the sign: "Price of Admission Today, Twenty-five Cents." "A damaging admission," said Bierce, pointing to the sign.

"How so?" I inquired.

"An admission of ignorance! *Admittance* is the word meant."

"But," I protested; "both words are descendants of the same generic Latin word, *admitto*, and the preference, to me, would be *admission*; for the substantives, denoting a state of or the act of, when derived from a Latin verb, almost invariably form the derivative noun from the past participle, which, in the case of *admitto*, is (neuter) *admissum*. Would you say *permittance*?—which is a comparable word. No; it would be *permission*; because the past participle of *permitto* is *permissum*; hence the correct formation of the English noun—*permission*."

"You could not have supplied me with a better illustration of the point I make!" Bierce exclaimed. "All you say is true; but we use a living language, and all that live obey the one immutable law of mutability: the word *admission* has in time come to have an offensive meaning, and we cannot use the word, no matter how innocently, that it does not convey to the hearer at least some slight sense of opprobrium, of confession, of some wrongful or shameful act. The good speaker and the good writer of English must at times forget his Latin."

Later Bierce, probably remembering the Baltimore episode, included in his *Write It Right* the following item:

Admission for Admittance. "The price of admission is one dollar."

XII

Bierce's dislike of slang seemed to me to be unreasoned.

Many were our controversies, friendly enough, that were based upon some "otherwise good writer's" use of argot.

"But," I once protested, "language is made in the street!"

"It is not!" he was quick to exclaim. "It is made by scientists, in their laboratories—that is how language is made."

I asked him to sustain his thesis. He said that he would, and in writing, at that. For several weeks thereafter he would write to me every few days, giving examples of laboratory English, nearly all of which were nouns naming inventions and discoveries, and every one of either Greek or Latin derivation. His was a poor case. He knew I had him beaten; but he would not acknowledge defeat, and finally wrote the following definition for *Write It Right*:

Stock. "I take no stock in it." Disagreeably commercial. Say, I have no faith in it. Many such metaphorical expressions were unobjectionable, even pleasing, in the mouth of him who first used them, but by constant repetition by others have become mere slang, with all the offensiveness of plagiarism. The prime objectionableness of slang is its hideous lack of originality. Until mouth-worn it is not slang.

Yet, as I would contend, language is largely made of argot; and slang, even of the most vulgar, is almost invariably metaphor when first spoken. Furthermore, it supplies a need, by conveying a shade of meaning that no other word or phrase has power to carry; hence the word or phrase becomes incorporated in spoken and written language. "Control yourself," Bierce might have said; but how much more picturesque, graphic, restraining, and likely to bring about the end sought is the figurative admonition of the farmer when he says, "Hold your horses!"—the laborer in the street, when he blurts out, "Keep your shirt on!" Even language the most primitive is based on trope. Man can but meagerly express himself in any other way. To be sure,

metaphor ceases to be trope after its long and frequent use: it then becomes a part of an established language.

Nor was Bierce consistent: time and again he would warn his pupils not to schoolmaster their language, not to make of it a rigid, inflexible medium of expression, not to make a corpse of a growing, beautiful creature, pulsating with life. And, while bidding them beware, at the same time he was violating his injunction by both precept and example: for Bierce would not deliberately relax and deviate from the path of the purist; he dared not violate an established and time-tested method of expression. Why? There were numerous reasons; but chief among them, perhaps, was the fear of the little critic—a fear common to nearly all great writers.

When Bierce made use of slang, and did so deliberately, he always shrouded it in quotation-marks. Of course, he unwittingly used slang whenever he wrote, for nobody can write in the English language, nor in any other, without expressing himself in argot—or what was argot at one time and now is a part of the tongue.

He would write to Sterling in one letter, pointing out the inflexibility of the sonnet, saying that if one could not write a sonnet in perfect form, in one of the established forms, tested by many years and found to be the best of its kind, he should write some other type of verse; and in another letter he would tell Sterling that he should not hesitate to vary the sonnet form, no matter how rigid that form, provided the variance should seem to him to be justifiable and the sonnet the better for it. But—and here I might give a whole line of *but*s—but show me the sonnet that Bierce ever wrote that deviates in the slightest degree from any classic form! Why? His fear of the little critic—shallow as a pool, with only surface-ripples of knowledge—and his fear of the pedant, who would be bound to say, “Here is a

man who is entirely unfamiliar with the classic forms of the sonnet."

I too dread the little critic and the pedant, the two little fellows who assume that my knowledge is bounded by their own. Nevertheless, while certain to incur their condemnation and ridicule, I have deliberately addressed a sonnet to Ambrose Bierce, at the beginning of this volume, in which I have varied the usual Petrarchian octave by giving to mine three terminal rhyme sounds. In doing so I have been no greater criminal than Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, Richard Garnett, Francis Turner Palgrave, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, J. Addington Symonds, Oscar Wilde, and a host of others who have written sonnets in which both the octave and sestet were identical in form with this particular sonnet of mine. Bierce, if living, would applaud my bravery; but in writing a sonnet he would have sacrificed values in order to avoid the sneers of the little critic and the sonorous thunderings of the pedant.

But, to return to Bierce's condemnation of slang, it was severe yet unreasoned—at least, not fully thought out. After all, was not his outcry directed against the type of slang that we all find so objectionable?—unless George Ade be excepted as one to whom all slang is pleasing, and Ade's particular slang maddened Bierce. He once wrote of Ade that "He has made his reputation in slang and lost it in English."

Language was not only made in laboratories, he held, but also was the result of warfare. Warfare? Quite so: by the illiterate of the street, by the farmer, by the stickup man—by their argot transferred from their habitats to the battlefield. Of course it is true that when war is waged against a people speaking a foreign tongue the foreign words are incorporated in the language of each body of combatants, and when a country is conquered and permanently occupied

by the enemy, the language of the vanquished people may become (and usually does) a polyglot tongue. That language is made by warfare, is indisputable; but even so the new words, the adoption of old ones, and the alterations of form of foreign words are for the greater part effected by the illiterate. This Bierce would not directly admit.

XIII

"Whatever the form of literature, *verisimilitude* is essential; be it as false as history, as untruthful as the Bible, it must seem true. To write convincingly, be logical; however great the lie you are telling, be circumstantial, true to details. The authors of the Old Testament were masters in the art of lying. They knew how to relate their whoppers with circumstance, with details that were true, or might have been, and so produced a literature unexcelled in *perversio veri*.

"*Sincerity* is the heart of *spontaneity*. When you are lying, then, believe your own lie, and what you say will be spontaneous. One can work himself into a fine frenzy in the telling of a falsehood that will even exceed the emotional pitch reached in relating the truth."

XIV

"Strange, how one forgets what one has written in the heat of composition! It is impossible to rewrite a manuscript that has been destroyed; useless to try. One may assemble the facts again, but his new creation will lack the spontaneity that quickened the old and will seem to the author a lifeless thing. That is not to say that one cannot endlessly improve his original manuscript. He will make changes in it while reading it for the thousand-and-second time—and then improve it, Art, to the artist-creator, is never ultimate."

I am reminded of a story Bierce told me. He had purchased, somewhat at random, a book at a stall in a railway station. While on the train he found it to be a collection of short-stories by different authors, and soon became absorbed in one tale, attributed to an anonymous writer. He was amazed at its masterly style, its great literary power, its excellence in every respect, and determined to find out all he could about the author. That man, he decided, was the literary peer of Ambrose Bierce, and deserved a niche in the most exclusive of libraries. The tale haunted him. He went about praising it inordinately, and made the most searching inquiries in the hope of discovering the identity of the author, but all to no end. In a flash it came to him: the story was his own, written years before.

XV

So far as I am aware, Bierce never wrote to arouse concupiscence; and he infrequently put his pen to anything that might not be read aloud in a mixed gathering. Billingsgate was usually his limit of coarseness and vulgarity as a writer. He had no use at all for authors given to indecencies in their books, any more than he would have had for those same authors if they were brazenly to commit in public the same offenses they commit in print. Nothing may be done in a book that may not with propriety be done openly in life. Literature is not made of filth.

“Love stories are dangerous things. They can be so written as to relate stories of exalted love; such love stories *are* written; and, in consequence, both authors and readers are the better. But there is nothing carnal in the love about which an author in decency is permitted to write. Love may be carnal, to be sure; the love of a man and a woman must be in part; but how small is that part, beautiful, exalting, ennobling, as it is. However, the conjugal couch is enshrined

in the home, away from prying eyes, and no lascivious author may violate its sanctity by exposing it to public gaze.

"Does the lascivious writer thirst for fame?—or for infamy? No doubt he does thirst for the one or the other; but he also itches for money. Well, let me tell him that in the long run he will get far more of this world's riches by writing clean literature than he can possibly acquire from any pornographic wallowing, however great the stink he stirs up. Millions of copies of *John Halifax, Gentleman*, for example, have been sold through the years, many millions more will yet be sold; but how many copies of *Moll Flanders* have been bought since that story was first written by Defoe? When I refer to *Moll Flanders* in literary circles I have to give the name of the author in order to connect him with his book. *Robinson Crusoe*—not a love story, to be sure—has sold by the millions where *Roxana, or the Fortunate Mistress* and *Moll Flanders* have for centuries been buried in the tombs of museums.

"If anybody of a contrary opinion is disposed to differ with me as to the respective salability of clean and unclean books and points to the *Arabian Nights*, I shall inform him that virtually the entire sale of that great work of literature is confined to expurgated editions. Nor is this due to prohibitory laws: the vast number of readers of the *Arabian Nights* find no loss due to expurgation: the literary values are not marred by the elimination of carnal dalliance."

XVI

"Censorship? It is essential, and it must begin with the author himself, who must exercise strict discipline. Censorship is universal: it is not confined to the arts. As to decency trammeling art, it has never done so; and the artist who is unable to write, to paint, to model, within the limitations of good taste, shows that his grasp of art is feeble. I favor

reasonable censorship laws as applicable to the arts and even to expressions of a political character; for without censorship the State would be defenseless. Equally I favor justifiable revolutions; yet, an existing State without sedition laws would soon be a suicide. Name such laws as you please, still, they are intended to suppress sedition, conspiracy, and rebellion. Upon the enforcement of such enactments the life of the State depends.

"And every law is a censorship statute. Some of the literary soap-boxers, shrieking condemnation of literary censorship laws, are at the same time approving the law that inflicts the death penalty for murder. A violation of good taste in literary expression outrages me more than does many a crime of murder committed under the stress of some powerful and justifiable emotion."

Bierce held a brief for Anthony Comstock. "Ridicule all you please the idea that nudity in art does not arouse sex desire, yet the fact remains that it does: sculptures, paintings, be they ever so 'chaste' in the nude, are no more 'chaste' than is the living naked girl standing, or lying down, or in whatever posture she may have taken before you. But her nakedness will arouse sex desire in the male, nevertheless, and so will her image in art. To be sure, artists are pleased to differentiate 'nudity' and 'nakedness.' They are better artists than they are lexicographers. I hope Anthony will not succeed; but he has my intellectual support."

XVII

"It is no adequate defense of a charge of insincerity, or untruth, that the thing said is, as a matter of fact, true. In a literary sense it may be false. Conversely, what is false in fact may be truth in fiction, and also in other forms of writings. Often truth may be best shown in exaggeration. The poet is the evangelist of truth; yet, what he says is not

always true: his message is often conveyed by magnificent exaggeration. He fails as a poet, too, and becomes unworthy of contempt, when he qualifies his extravagance. If a writer chooses to describe ten thousand angels dancing on a needle's point, he may; furthermore, his description may convey a truth. When David sang, 'I said in my haste, All men are liars,' he weakened his song by the words, 'in my haste,' qualifying, as he did, a literal truth, although in his prosaic moments he may have thought he had greatly exaggerated. Thomas Jefferson proved himself the better poet when he unqualifiedly wrote this astounding lie: 'We hold these truths be self-evident, that all men are created equal'—two lies, in fact."

XVIII

"Narrative fiction, intended as fiction, should seldom be based upon actual occurrences. Facts interfere with imagination, and imagination surpasses fact, and is the truer. In the hands of an artist, and he a writer of imagination, ten thousand characters may be blended in one. No great character of fiction ever lived in flesh and blood; the character is far greater than any mortal—or any god. Fiction should be fiction; it then becomes truth."

XIX

"Authors seldom make good proofreaders of their own compositions. From fœtus to philosopher, a man undergoes various barbaric stages of development, and, in his impressionable youth, inaccuracies of speech are fastened on him from which he is never entirely freed. The best of writers, then, at times makes use of solecisms that are acquired in his boyhood, and he usually overlooks many when reading the proofs of his own work.

"There is still another reason why the author is inefficient

as a proofreader of what he has written: he is ever under the spell of the ardor or fine frenzy with which he wrote; he is swept along as he reads his proofs by the same old creative urge, and consequently sees his words in a haze. But he is responsible for what he writes, nevertheless, and his responsibilities are multiplied when he publishes his compositions. Damn him, then, whenever he lets a solecism survive."

XX

"Sooner or later, my author-pupils are bound to ask me, What, then, is suitable literary material? My invariable reply is that it embraces all human thought, all organic experience, and also much that relates to the inorganic—provided it be interesting. The *opus* is literature only when it holds the unteachable elements of genius. It should be, but not always is, expressed with perfect art; it may be great literature even if imperfect in technique. I may as well add that there are but few instances of perfect expression in any literature. But there are a few: brief passages always. After all, what a man writes about is comparatively inconsequential; it is what he says that delights the ages of men."

XXI

"Fashions — periods in literature — transitory, often marked by less than the span of a man's life, seem to me to have been more common to the literature of the English language than to the literatures of antiquity. Style was more uniformly excellent in Greece and in Rome than ever in England, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal and America. This may be accounted for in part by the fact that modern languages are continually growing. At the time that the literatures of Greece and Rome were at their zenith, the

languages of those two nations were alive too, changing restlessly, becoming more complex, until in death they became perfect. The essential difference lies in this: the Greeks and the Romans were the more cultured peoples: they lived to grow up: their mental processes were matured. All this was reflected in what they wrote. It would be unfair to establish a comparison between classical literature and the literatures of more recent years: the peoples of the last past six hundred years have not reached mental maturity; nor have their literatures.

"So we find an unevenness of literary values of the last past six hundred years that was unknown to the literatures of Greece and of Rome when those two nations were in their ripe old age. Side by side stood Shakespeare and a number of other writers, towering as did the literary *genii* of mellowed Greece and Rome; but Shakespeare—and a few of his inferiors that were worthy to sit in the temple where he worshiped—were in the midst of a crude civilization that abounded in immature writers—a condition unknown in the Greece and the Rome of the classics. There are too many classes in a developing civilization; in the ripest culture there are but two—and writers are not of the lower.

"Fashions and fads run their nauseous course; yet, some hold excellent methods, and because they are excellent they are literally worked to death: they cease to function. Let us take, for example, outbursts of eloquence by an orator. Dangerous? To be sure, and must not be overdone; but passionate and exaggerated eloquence has its legitimate uses, and the scoffers should cease jeering at the present-day orator of the 'old-school' type who at times indulges in flamboyant periods in the course of his oration. Another example of justifiable methods now taboo is derisively termed 'fine writing,' so greatly ridiculed by uninformed

critics of the press when they (rarely) encounter it in current books and magazines. It has its proper place, one that it has held for several thousand years, and should not be thoughtlessly condemned. The great writer knows its use and avoids its abuse. So, too, the apostrophe is laughed at by self-nominated sophisticated critics; nevertheless, it can be handled by a master writer with tremendous effect. Examples might be endlessly multiplied of good methods so overdone during a brief period of revival that they are ultimately ridiculed out of usage; but they will finally have their proper place in the service of literature. In addition to overuse, they have lost caste through improper application; for only the great artist has ever known the purposes they properly serve. Let the 'prentice hand avoid these tools; let only the master wield them. And the master needs no admonition from youth; he knows the craftsman's requirements.

"Another point in this connection: the master is alive to the importance of the level of values of excellence: he neither rises above nor falls below. Apostrophe and 'fine writing' are as offensive in their wrong setting as gutter slang is inappropriate to—'fine writing,' shall I say? It may pain the master to keep down to his own level of excellence; but he must, and he does. Yet, in his wingéd flight he cannot soar too high; and his flight must be long as well as lofty: 'Heaven is not reached at a single bound.' "

XXII

Bierce wrote with a steel pen, never with a fountain pen, never with a gold pen, and in his later years usually used a typewriter—"the machine, not the gal," as he would explain. He did not dictate; he could not; and thought those authors at a disadvantage who did not perform mechanical labor when composing. Dictation led to verbosity.

"Henry James might be cited as an example. He was a better writer before he began to dictate to a stenographer. When his labor became vocal, how he did talk and talk and talk!"

XXIII

Both the long romance and the novel Bierce held in disesteem. The short-story to him was the most artistic form of prose fiction.

"After all," said he, "what is the novel but a collection of short stories, rather loosely connected usually, and frequently so disconnected as to be unintelligible? The short-story is based upon one incident, an occurrence, while the novel is always numerous stories of different occurrences—in other words, it is a collection of indifferent short tales, none possessing the technique of the short-story when its rigid laws are obeyed."

"The dictionary," I suggested, "might be cited as an example of the novel pernicious."

"Quite so," he affirmed; "and carries about the same degree of *vraisemblance*. Lexicographers *are* novelists. I love the one as I do the other."

XXIV

"It is now the fashion for vocational literary critics to sneer at the fiction writer who bases his story on 'primitive emotions'—on lust, greed, avarice, envy, hatred, malice, vengeance, love, self-sacrifice, renunciation—yet, all emotions are primitive, and all human acts originate in emotional impulses. What would the critics have of us? A technical work on astronomy? The account of a geologist of some rock formation? An engineer's mathematical computations that show the relative strength of different structural metals? A botanist's treatise on the grafting of plants?

All very interesting to scientists! But, inanimate things, inorganic chemistry, astronomy, mathematics, enter fictional literature only as they affect primitive human emotions. In the dark of the moon a murder is committed; in the light of the moon lovers plight their troth; and the moon as an astronomical object interests not at all either the murderer or the lover, nor the reader of either a mystery story or a romance. Nevertheless, the vocational critic *à la mode* seems to think there is something shameful in primitive emotions, and that their display in fictional literature is not to be countenanced. The primordial instincts and their exercise will continue as the vital elements in the literature of human relationships long after the young critics have grown old."

XXV

Strange to relate, Bierce held that the general extension of knowledge placed the author of imaginative literature at a disadvantage, that readers had become sophisticated and, consequently, their imagination atrophied. When all the world held the earth to be flat and that one might fall off its edge into some bottomless pit, or into some strange land, or anything happen to him that the human mind might conceive (and everything seemed probable to the untutored mind); when the sky was a star-spangled canopy so near that it might be penetrated by some agile adventurer, who might, once through, explore hidden countries; when one might fall through a hole bottomed in Hell and in the regions of the damned find Dante's vision realized; when a mariner dreamed endless dreams of lands that lay beyond the sea (and no dream seemed impossible of fulfillment when, as late as the middle of the Nineteenth Century, Poe could convincingly take his readers to the moon)—then, verisimilitude go hang! Improbability!—nothing then was improbable: new comets might be discovered daily, the

planets traversed, new races found. But now—now the author approaches his imaginative work warily, the readers wearily, and all are unconvinced. Loud were Bierce's lamentations.

Strange, this view, as I have said. Bierce seemed to have assumed all nature to be an open book; yet, he lived in a day of marvelous discoveries, teasing the imagination as it was never excited in days of denser ignorance, until Jules Verne seemed to have been devoid of imagination, his prescience a cheap thing. Today we may base a story upon the suspension of gravitation; we may clarify our conception of divinity by imagining a personal God encased in some huge ethereal envelope, so divinely insulated as to be invulnerable to the laws of gravitation; we may take countless journeys in similar envelopes, so insulated as to render its occupants impervious to heat and cold, and spend our summers on the sun and our winters at Lake Frigid, Uranus; for time and motion are now merely relative; and who shall gainsay us, however extravagant our fantastic stories? This may be said in explanation of Bierce's contention: during the whole period of his literary career sophistication was so ordered that the contemporary sophisticates held everything to be impossible that had not already been mathematically demonstrated to be actuality.

XXVI

"As to the trend of literature," said Bierce in one of his general discussions with me: "Has it retrograded?—Has it progressed?—Is it stagnant?—If no better, if no worse, is the reason to be found in an imperceptible mental advancement of human beings? These are questions that are frequently asked. The answer is, that the literatures of highly-civilized nations throughout recorded times are essentially on one plane. Even methods have not differed widely; even

changes of mode that have promised permanency have fallen into disuse. One should not mistake the mere differences in artistry in depicting the customs of a civilization as differing essentially from contemporary civilization as an inherent difference in style. Fashions change, peoples differ; but thought and character remain too nearly similar in the human species, after the brief period of seven thousand years of recorded time, to bring about any noteworthy difference in methods of literary expression. Artistry is eternal. Perfection in art, we have often been told—probably without truth—has never been attained, and is unattainable. However this may be, if attained, it must ever endure. The great principles of any art are applicable to every branch of art and to every human process, and those principles are largely common to all civilizations, to all differing manners.

“I see no reason why anybody should assume that literary productivity is any less in our time in either quantity or quality than in any previous era. Only distant posterity can weigh our era, to be sure; but all the arts of our age would seem highly developed, and quantitative productivity has not lessened the always sluggish flow of masterpieces. We must not be led astray by the absence of genius during brief periods—fifty years, say, or a hundred years, or even longer. It is seldom, though, that there has been even a single year in which all artists were somnambulant—a year when not one of all the many branches of art was without a towering genius, functioning in a way to animate artists yet unborn.

“I find it rather tiresome, too, this incessant harping upon the immense volume of unworthy products that are intended to pass for art. Time has never been when the incompetent were not vastly in excess of the fit in all fields of human endeavor. But the artist is not affected at all by the inartistic—unless, indeed, he profits by their mistakes. When there

are ten great architects of a given period, and no more, the mediocrity of ten thousand others may still leave that age one of great architectural achievement. Blessed is the era that has one great artist in any one of the many domains of art. The productivity of mediocrity, then, does not smother any artist; he but breathes the freer.

"Ours should be riper artistry than that of previous eras, for ours is the greater population; and for even a better reason: the period of maturity of man has more than doubled during the last past century. And great literature—all great art as a whole—is the product of ripened wisdom, of intellectual maturity. There are the exceptions, of course, and youth has its great artists; but, even so, if they had not died when young, how much greater would have been the art of their long years of maturity. As it is, the art of the world has been given to us by the middle-aged, the elderly, and the old.

"Another question frequently asked is this: Does a man's art work that deserves to live through the ages ever fail to achieve the fame that it merits? Yes, it does, in all the arts save one, and that one is literature. But none fails of contemporary fame. The architectural structure, the painting, the sculpture, the musical composition as played or sung, the art of the actor—all crumble and are lost in decay, if material objects; lost in the air if a voice; dead if the work of an actor. Musical scores may live; likewise works of literature; copies of both can be taken *ad infinitum*.

"As to literature, we know it only through the sifting process of time; but I am disposed to think that nothing truly great has ever been published that in time has failed to be measured in accordance with its merits. I should say that it would be as difficult to suppress a great work of literature as it would be to create a place for mediocrity in permanent letters. Time just has a way of thrusting his

mightly hand into the huge bin that we call the world and plucking from the surrounding chaff the living grains of literature. Not one grain escapes that all-powerful clutch. The disappointed author is a fool. Even his manuscript needs but one understanding reader in addition to himself to carry his work to success. No unworthy book has ever been so advertised as to make it worthy—or profitable, for that matter. No good book needs printers' ink to sell it other than that used on its own pages. The readers of a book sell it, if they like it, and if distasteful, they suppress its sale. The compositor who is intelligent enough to set the type of a book is all-sufficient to start its sale by word of mouth that will carry the volume to all the success that it deserves."

XXVII

Bierce held booksellers, as a class, in high esteem. In bookstores, he would say, one can find many of our real men of letters among the proprietors and the clerks. "They are booksellers for the reason that they love books. Many of them are men of deep erudition. There is no vocation in which the percentage of culture is greater. Thank the good God! Equally is He to be thanked for the satisfaction they take in their state of *res angusta domi*. If publishers had but half their knowledge of literature and but a tenth of their integrity!"

XXVIII

"Should an author mindful of his art take his reader into his confidence and reveal his plot at the outset of his story? Is that ever justifiable? I hold that it is; and in more than one instance I have followed my precept by example, as in the case of *A Horseman in the Sky*, to mention but one of my stories. The matter is one for the author to decide. He

should be governed by the kind of story he has to tell. The rule of three is not to be applied by writers of fiction: they should have a care in the use of any literary rule. The measure of pleasure that a reader might take in a narrative is often denied when the dénouement is withheld until the end of the story."

If any problem that confronts writers bothered Bierce at all—and I think none did in his latter years—this one might be cited. Again the little critic buzzed about his ears. The pest had inoculated the vast army of mediocre writers with the virus of the commonplace, and the commonplace writers were all shouting, "You mustn't do it! You mustn't give away your plot! Everybody knows that!" But great writers of the drama, the short-story, the romance, the novel, have been doing this very thing since time immemorial. It takes not at all from the pleasure I experience in witnessing a performance of *Becky Sharp* that I am wholly within the confidence of Thackeray and have read his *Vanity Fair* several times. In fact, I enjoyed Mrs. Fiske as *Becky* the third time I saw her in that part better than I did the first time. I personally hold that the secretive story is of no high order if literary values are suppressed for no other reason than to hold the reader in suspense and to surprise him at the end of the tale. *The Lady or the Tiger* might be cited as an exception, also other types; but can anybody pick out any story of any of these types that may be classified as literature of a high order? *Surprise* is of doubtful literary value, even in detective stories. Perhaps Bierce never went so far as I do in the condemnation of unjustifiable "tricks" of writers; but he certainly contended, as he showed by some of his own fiction, that *surprise* is not essential to a good story of prose fiction. The little child says, "Tell it again, Daddy; tell it again!" and will hear without tiring the same story related daily for years.

"Of course," said Bierce, "it is an inviolable law of writers not deliberately to mislead a reader, and any violation of this injunction brings upon the writer condign punishment."

XXIX

Bierce's oral diction was well-nigh faultless; but he would point out that many who write almost flawlessly will murder the King's English when speaking, and pointed, as an example, to a friend of ours, a military writer of first importance, whose written language was almost impeccable, yet who assassinates the English language every time he opens his mouth. Conversely, any number of persons who can speak correctly, and who rarely err in their oral diction, are unable to fashion a grammatical written sentence. In both cases the reasons are obvious.

XXX

"The first duty of an author is to be interesting. Every sentence that he writes must be of interest. He who does not obey this First Commandment of the literary megalogue will incur the inevitable punishment of not being read."

XXXI

The insufficient use of connectives, a tendency constantly increasing, met with Bierce's disapproval. Time was when the conjunction was overworked. Now many writers mar what otherwise would be excellent style by the omission of essential connectives. The conjunction most slighted was *that*.

XXXII

Bierce could not understand how Woodrow Wilson could

have achieved a reputation for colorful expression, unless his fame might be attributed to the ignorance of his fame-makers. Wilson's was the style somniloquent, achieved by "bromides" and by outworn phrases, used as if by one walking in his sleep, in turn lulling his readers to slumber. Wilson on Eliot!—"it was to laugh!" Wilson had undertaken to improve the diction of the then President of Harvard University. Perhaps he had succeeded. Homer had sometimes nodded; doubtless Doctor Eliot at times had dozed; but they who revere the former President of Princeton and wish to perpetuate his literary fame had better not compare Wilson and Eliot as stylists.

"Yet," said Bierce meditatively, "the public that reads is affronted by colorful words, by anything new, by any expression that is not outworn, and estimates a writer's proficiency in his art by the number of shots of bromide that he can inject into his readers. Today our language as used is largely made up of phrases that take the place of a single word, phrases that were once metaphor but now invoke no imagery. Are such writers the better understood? Probably so—by the unlettered."

XXXIII

"There is no synonym. New words are born from the womb of necessity. They are not twins, nor triplets, nor litters. No two words convey precisely the same shade of meaning."

XXXIV

"Just now it is fashionable for authors to wear masks. The more outrageous is the fashion to fit a mask on some great writer who never wore one—on Browning, for example. Now, *obscurity* is a penal literary offense. If Browning had been obscure—and he never was—his crime would

have been grievous. But the Browning societies would have us believe that he was great because obscure. He could be made intelligible only by their esoteric interpretations. Like the late Joshua ben Joseph, they are Eddyizing, interpolating his fine poems with their own verbose illuminations: one line of Browning, one tome of Eddyization.

"Even so staunch a critic as our friend Percival Pollard has been swept off his feet. He came to me a few weeks ago with a slender brochure in his hand, saying, 'Here, at last, is a fine book of verse.' Upon cross-examination, it developed that the only reason Percy thought it great was its unintelligibility, and it was so labeled—*A Book of Masques*. It was erotic rot, written by a lad of eighteen, as I later found out. If the general title of the same verses had been *Something We Can All Understand*, Pollard would have been disgusted with the verse he so inordinately praised when published with the *Masque* title; but, as Pollard admits, he knows nothing of poetry, and I will add that he knows less of verse.

"*Hoi polloi* has ever thought great anything beyond its comprehension. The literary clown in mask and motley will continue for a while to dandle his bauble, amid the plaudits of the unlettered, and the Robert Brownings must suffer."

XXXV

"Strange, that in America oratory and state papers are not counted as literature when worthy of a place in the hall of letters. Why? A book of essays would be so classified."

XXXVI

"The pedagogues tell us that knowledge of more than one language is essential to great authorship. So it is, since there is no language that is not made up of other languages, nor has there ever been; for every language must be poly-

glot; but if we count as one language, as we may, the language made of many, none other is needed. How absurd are those who say that, to write great literature in the English language, the author must be versed in one or more other tongues—in Latin, in Greek, in the Romance languages, for example. We are told that Shakespeare knew little Latin and less Greek; but he knew the English language of his time pretty well, and that he wrote with some skill, all must admit. Pity Homer was cramped, having no knowledge of Latin, French, German, and Italian! If Cicero had only been versed in the French tongue! Too much language may unfit an author as a writer in any tongue.

“As I have so often said, great literature is the product of straight thinking, and even a small vocabulary may be sufficient to convey thought exquisitely expressed. Lincoln’s vocabulary was not extensive; he was not even well versed in his own language; but he wrote the Gettysburg Address. Edward Everett, a linguist and a scholar, who rendered an address at the same time and place—well, what did he say? Burns, great as a poet, had a very small vocabulary of either Gaelic or English; yet, I doubt if his poetry would have been greater had his vocabulary comprised every word of every language ever spoken. If an author is unable to clothe his thoughts, to the slightest shade of meaning, in artistic, graceful, or powerful words of the English language, knowledge of all other languages would be of no service to him. When a writer uses the English language, he uses all—and the best ever.”

XXXVII

“The author should remember that his characters are always in his presence and in the presence of his readers, and he should bear in mind that he has no right to take liberties with them. Presumably they are human things. If

he would address Miss Elizabeth Jones if he met her in the street as 'Miss Jones,' he has no right to call her 'Liz-zie' when he meets her in his book under similar circumstances."

The style of the peasantry among authors these days is one of gushing familiarity. It would be a relief to meet a few characters in a book just as I would ordinarily encounter them—not in a bedroom, where authors of the peasantry would always have us meet them, but in a drawing-room. In a salon I might consent to associate with Miss Smith; but I would not tolerate the same girl as "Tootsie" in a book, or anywhere. Dr. Reginald Trevelyan, the scientist, might be an agreeable companion in real life; I would refuse to number him among my acquaintances as "Reggie" in any story. I object to associating familiarly with fictional characters, introduced to me by their given names, or, worse still, by their nicknames—creatures that I would pass unnoticed in the street, denying to them the honor of my recognition. Let us now and then say "Mr." Smith and "Miss" Jones.

"Writers of the sort, too, insist upon forcing their readers into situations that the decent among them must find offensive. The writer would not dare follow a similar course in real life. He would not take a slight acquaintance, or an entire stranger, tiptoeing with him across the hallway, to squint through a keyhole or to peep over a transom. Yet such writers as these shout incessantly that they are 'revealing life as it is lived,' while, in point of fact, life never has been lived that way, and the writer would make himself ridiculous if he tried to enact in real life the scenes he so brazenly contrives for his stories. He certainly would be badly damaged physically, and would be lucky to escape with his life, if caught in the equivocal situations that seem inoffensive to him as they are related in his book. You

would favor me by placing these views before Mr. George Moore."

XXXVIII

"Amid the welter of bad women, with which current literature teems, let us remember that there are also good women, and I commend to writers my aphorism,¹

"Study good women and ignore the rest,
For he best knows the sex who knows the best."

XXXIX

"When an author legitimately has his head in the sky, let him be mindful of the ground, on which at least one foot should rest." This oral advice Bierce repeated in substance in his foreword to *Write It Right*: "While it is true that some colloquialisms and, with less license, even some slang, may be sparingly employed in light literature, for point, piquancy or any of the purposes of the skilled writer sensible to the necessity and charm of keeping at least one foot on the ground, to others the virtue of restraint may be commended as distinctly superior to the joy of indulgence." Elsewhere in this volume I have commented on Bierce's attitude toward slang.

XL

"Be ye well assured, beloved brethren of my craft, that, be ye ever so wary, your sins of pretense will find you out."

XLI

Music, so intimately allied with literature, was seldom the subject of comment by Bierce. He had very little knowledge of the Orphean art, and never heard any opera sung, never listened to a symphony, never attended any musical

¹ *The Collected Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 77.

recital, during the years I knew him. Yet, I think he was fond of music, and I have heard him say that he would rather be a master of the violin, the musical instrument that he preferred, than of the sonnet. Nevertheless, he professed to detest the piano as he did the dog. Both professed aversions I put down as sheer shams. How could he have loved the violin and hated the piano? He might as well have said that he loved the rose and hated the violet. If music, it was music whether produced by a jewsharp or an organ; the human voice, or a zither. His pretenses were frequently uncovered by the incongruity of his remarks: granting the one truth, the other necessarily followed, and two truths could not be contradictory. So with the drama: he professed that he read Sophocles with keen delight; yet, that dramatist's plays would not interest him when acted, however capable the actors. He would say that the theater gave him no pleasure, however great the masterpiece, capably presented; but I never heard him give a lucid explanation of the cause of his dislike. I charged up his professed distaste to pretense, to posing, begun at an early age, and kept up to the end, and balanced the account by the entry "posing." I never heard him make any comment on music or on the histrionic art that I consider of sufficient weight to be set down among these dicta.

I do not claim that Bierce had no ear for music; on the contrary, he shows by his prose, and particularly by his verse, that he had an unerring sense of rythm; but he knew little or nothing of the technique of music, and his acquaintance with the work of the masters was—*nihil*. Nor was he versed in the history of music: he knew nothing of the lives of its creators, and was equally ignorant of even the names of its virtuosi. Wagner the poet he admired; Wagner the musician was unknown to him.

XLII

Cinema productions were pretty crude at the time of Bierce's death; nevertheless, he thought the movies promised well for the extension of literature. The method—the pantomime—was as old as the Greek drama; but the invention of the motion picture camera, the perfecting of rapid photography, which in time would come, would revolutionize the drama. The movies would become capable of producing artistic effects that the spoken play unaided could never attain. He did not foresee the talkies. Together we went to a number of cinema shows, and his interest was intense, his imagination alert, visioning this new art's future, exploring another world, in which, he predicted, various new and great arts would be developed.

He had no patience with the critics, standing, as they did, aghast at something new, to them not understandable, and therefore not art; consequently, to be sneered at, laughed at, and dismissed as fit only for the vulgar. To me it is amusing how those same little critics are now writing that by their encouragement they were instrumental in establishing the movies as a legitimate method of artistic expression.

XLIII

Among those who profited by Bierce's oral literary dicta was Hudson Maxim, clever, an inventor, a straight thinker, a devotee of letters, an indifferent writer, inordinately conceited, peculiarly offensive in the display of his conceit, and one who used Bierce's unwritten words liberally and without credit—Bierce's dicta as spoken in part in my presence. We three dined together a number of times. When Maxim's *The Science of Poetry and The Philosophy of Language* was published, in 1910, Bierce was in California on a few weeks' outing, and I facetiously wrote to him my congratula-

tions on the appearance of his new book, at the same time expressing my regret that so many opinions were presented that were contrary to those that he had previously written or had expressed *viva voce*.

Upon returning to Washington, Bierce purchased a copy of the volume, and one evening, in his apartment at the Olympia, he read aloud to me the parts that were his and those that were Maxim's, crediting the eminent scientist with this marvelous invention: "Poetry is the expression of insensuous thought in sensuous terms by artistic trope." This definition was followed by another, the exact language of which I do not recall, to the effect that *surprise* was the essence of poetry. Bierce likewise gave Maxim credit for that astounding discovery. But when Maxim went on to say: "Break up verse structure, turn the thought into prose, yet still the poetry is there," Bierce said the words were exactly as written by himself years before, with the single exception of the word *still*, which he disclaimed.

Bierce found Maxim's part of the book both interesting and amusing, and said that it revealed humor and wit of a high order. He was particularly amused by Maxim's attack on writers of books on poetry, who would undertake to define poetry, then declare it to be indefinable. Truly, Maxim was at his best when describing the antics of these zanies on Parnassus. Maxim himself was an excellent constructive critic in both verse and poetry. He could also make ludicrous mistakes.

As to *surprise* in verse and in poetry, granting the desirability of surprise, it seems not to have occurred to him that a great poem would cease to be poetry on the second reading, since it would no longer surprise the reader. I called Bierce's attention to this point. "Pity," he commented sarcastically, "that poetry is so transitory, so unenduring,

with no place in permanent literature! That deduction logically follows upon Maxim's opinion—if correct."

XLIV

"The value of the terminology of a craft to the craftsman is beyond computation. By a word he is spared the labor of long explanations, many of which would be unintelligible to the layman, and unnecessary to put before his fellow-craftsmen. But terminology, despite its value, can be misapplied, and may forever fasten ignorance upon—well, upon literature, for example. Thus, I never heard of the 'split infinitive' until I had passed my youth——"

"For the very excellent reason," I interrupted, "that no such severance can be effected."

"How's that?" he enquired.

I then told him of an essay that I had in preparation, in which I was contending that there was no such part of speech as the verb "to be," nor could be, for by no process of reasoning could the word *to* be made a verb. As a preposition, as a sign of the infinitive, it remained a preposition, and no other part of speech. Euphony, constant repetition of the sign in connection with the infinitive, might account for the carelessness with which the preposition is mis-called a verb; but it can never be a verb in itself, nor any part of a verb, although it may be an adverb as well as a preposition, according to its use. The word *to* is either a preposition or an adverb; it is never any other part of speech; it can never be used in the place of any other part of speech. Hence, to insert an adverb between the preposition *to* and the infinitive *be*, thus separating the sign of the infinitive from the verb, does not "split" the infinitive. I should like to see anybody try to split it; it cannot be done. There is no "split infinitive."

Bierce was deeply interested. This view of the so-called

verb "to be" was new to him; so far as I am aware, too, it has been expressed by none other than myself, and is here printed for the first time.

In the "split infinitive" we have an excellent example with which to illustrate Bierce's observation that, "give a locution a name and, however inaccurate it may be, however ignorantly applied, it is fastened upon good writers, upon men who know, as if some Old Man of the Sea, and is there forever." We shall probably never hear the last of the "split infinitive," and brave is the man who does not heed the voice of the little critic—the critic who pounces upon the writer who places an adverb between the preposition *to* and the infinitive of a verb, although the author may be a great writer and, with deliberation, as in the case of so many careful writers, has strengthened his diction in this way. So, slaves, we must kow-tow to the little critic, reverently genuflect before him, then curse him with every vituperative epithet in our vocabulary. If we do not heed him, our most serious compositions, our best literature, may be held up to ridicule, and only a few—for the truly learned are in a pitiful minority—will know that the ignorant little critic, molder of public opinion of the multitude, is the inflated frog who a bull would be.

"Now," said Bierce, who accepted my view of the word *to* in its relation to the infinitive form of the verb, "let us see if we can puzzle out just why exception is taken to the placing of an adverb between the sign of the infinitive and the verb that follows. Every good writer in my early days, before the 'split infinitive' stalked abroad, had sufficient sense of feeling to know when the adverb should precede the preposition, when it should follow the verb, and when it should be placed between the two. But what is the objection *per se* to separating any verb from its auxiliary? Few writers find any. Why, then, does the critic place the stigma

of his rebuke upon the 'man who splits the infinitive' yet finds acceptable and customary the use of the adverb, and even many words of different parts of speech, between the modal and the main verb. One would suppose that it were a worse offense, if reprehensible at all, to split a tense than to separate an infinitive from its sign. I observe, however, that the almighty little fellows among the critics are increasingly insisting upon placing their adverbs either before or after the verb and its modal assistant, and would frown upon this present sentence, in which I have placed 'increasingly' between 'are' and 'insisting'—'not exactly incorrect, but bad taste, peasantry English, distinctly vulgar.' Doctor Samuel Johnson once wrote, 'What is read twice is commonly better remembered than what is transcribed.' As edited by Mr. Pisistratus Snooks, heir to Mr. William Dean Howells' *Easy Chair*, Doctor Johnson's correct passage is manhandled as follows: 'What is read twice commonly is remembered better than what is transcribed.' Take your choice. If Pollard be right in his contention that American literature is today dominated by the ladies, the diction of *hoi polloi* is inspired by our peasantry literary critics, who, themselves usually mere youths, are leading our young writers to perdition."

XLV

"All authors use pet words and tricks of phrasing that are characteristic of their style, doing so at times consciously, then, again, unwittingly. Even Poe, great artist as he was, overused some words and tricks of expression until they became wearisome. I count it a serious literary blunder—it is one seldom made by artists that are mindful of their calling—this overuse of pets and tricks. Sad it is, too, that they are taken up by every novice among writers and worked to death—to the death of patience. These amateurs, ignor-

ant louts, usually misuse these words, too, and add to the reader's exasperation. They don't add to mine: I don't read them."

XLVI

One evening a number of young writers, including myself, were being entertained informally by Bierce at his apartments in the Olympia, in Washington, and the general conversation drifted toward love—first love, its approaches, its general manifestations, and so on. One young man, then and now a gifted newspaper correspondent, who was a "real Kentucky colonel," having served on the staff of one of the governors, sedately remarked that he first fell in love when he was four or five years old, with a pronounced brunette of his own age. She had been named after "a very good woman," Mary Magdalen, but the little brunette was called by her people and everybody else Mary Mag de Lee, for short. The little brunette, it seems—and the Colonel was most eloquent in his description of her—was possessed of kinky hair, a flat nose, rolling lips, and a complexion as swarthy as a kitchen range. It seems that the twain would repair to an immense hogshead, less than half filled with hay, and there would neck by the hour. Bierce then turned the conversation to the sonnet, saying:

"See here, Neale, in that novel of yours, *The Betrayal*, you have one of your characters attempting the impossible—improvising a sonnet. It cannot be done. No man living can even *write* a sonnet worth the ink in which it is written in less time than several hours."

I explained that he had done me an injustice, that if he had read on he would have seen that the old fraud had composed the sonnet forty years before, and ever since had been "putting it over" as extemporaneous on young women as he would first meet them.

Several present were of the opinion that a good sonnet, even a great sonnet, might be composed and written out in an hour, and one young lady declared that she could perform creditably within twenty minutes on almost any theme. Bierce's eyes flashed fire.

"I'd like to see you try," said he; "and let me supply you with the theme."

"With the greatest pleasure," she responded, and seated herself at Bierce's desk.

Now this young woman had already achieved some fame as a poet. Her compositions had been published in leading magazines and had attracted some attention, from Bierce as well as others; but he could not bring himself to believe that a sonnet could even be shaped by any writer in twenty minutes. It so happened that he selected as the theme just the right thing, for the young girl was of Southern birth and rearing and knew pickaninnies and their progenitors as only Southerners know them. Said Bierce:

"The sonnet that you are to write, Miss Blank, must be addressed to Mary Mag de Lee, as if coming from the Colonel here, and must be perfect in form, sonorous, and worthy of publication."

Bierce held his watch in hand, and in exactly seventeen minutes Miss Blank handed to him the copy, which I render here in all its purity:

TO MARY MAG DE LEE

O Mary Mag de Lee—with kinky hair
So tightly shoestrunged 'gainst that brow of dusk,
And svelte dark form that never smelled of musk—
How your black hide to me was more than fair
When to the hogshead we two did repair!
Your deep-toned lips. . . . your milk-white baby tusk
A-gleam as through a chestnut's velvet husk. . . .
And we of but propinquity aware. . . .

Ah, how I dwell on you, lost love of mine!—
 I who from you so long, so far, have strayed!
 The crooning corn, the mooing of the kine,
 Your tender—Stay! of words I am afraid!—
 Come back to me and rouse me like warm wine,
 My meek, entrancing Ethiopian maid.

A dollar had been wagered. Bierce, smiling derisively, handed it over. He would have done so regardless of the merit of the thing.

Bierce's regard for the sonnet was not far short of reverential, yet, he would play with it, always brilliantly. I give one example of the unconventional:

TO MY LAUNDRESS¹

Saponacea, wert thou not so fair
 I'd curse thee for thy multitude of sins—
 For sending home my clothes all full of pins,
 A shirt occasionally that's a snare
 And a delusion, got, the Lord knows where,
 The Lord knows why, a sock whose outs and ins
 None know, nor where it ends nor where begins,
 And fewer cuffs than ought to be my share.

But when I mark thy lilies how they grow,
 And the red roses of thy ripening charms,
 I bless the lovelight in thy dark eyes dreaming.
 I'll never pay thee, but I'd gladly go
 Into the magic circle of thine arms,
 Supple and fragrant from repeated steaming.

Bierce's sonnets were few in light vein. Among those that were the nobler is the one that follows:

TO NANINE²

Dear, if I never saw your face again;
 If all the music of your voice were mute
 As that of a forlorn and broken lute;

¹ *The Collected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 183.

² *The Collected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 230.

If only in my dreams I might attain
The benediction of your touch, how vain
Were Faith to justify the old pursuit
Of happiness, or Reason to confute
The pessimist philosophy of pain.
Yet Love not altogether is unwise,
For still the wind would murmur in the corn,
And still the sun would splendor all the mere;
And I—I could not, dearest, choose but hear
Your voice upon the breeze and see your eyes
Shine in the glory of the summer morn.

XLVII

Percival Pollard was once complaining bitterly and illogically to Bierce and me, saying that the great among the authors of this earth were neglected, left unread, while millions devoured pap, lapped up swill, and gorged themselves with slops. "Where will you find," he queried, "one living author worthy of serious attention who is read beyond a few hundred volumes of any book that he has written? The great masters now in their graves are read only under compulsion by schoolchildren, aside from a few hundred connoisseurs of literature, and the greatest book of them all would be as dead as *The Book of the Dead* if it were not for a few choice souls!" Pollard modestly added that he himself could not hope to be read beyond a few score copies.

"Well," Bierce remarked, "you are the most inconsistent creature I have ever encountered! In this, however, you do not differ greatly from the other literary critics who inveigh against 'best sellers' while they seek to lower masterpieces to that class. Little do any of you comprehend that a single one of myriads of sentences that I might name if assimilated in full measure by a pap-eater would suddenly so enlarge his brain that his cranium would explode. His entire head would be blown off. It would be like a bursting bomb in battle. To

avoid such catastrophies, the proper pabulum is prepared for shop-girls and their gents. The Professor of Literature in the University of Unintelligence properly begins his course with Harold Bell Wright, and when that author has been partly assimilated, the students take a step forward, turning to Elinor Glyn, and having put in three weeks with that author, progressive steps are taken, until the freshman class finishes the first year with Lucas Malet and is ready to begin the sophomore term with the classics of Laura Jean Libbey. Ten thousand years hence his course will include your books, Pollard, but hardly before. Poor fellow, you have not the ability to write a 'best-seller!' You are doomed to the writing of masterpieces! But why grieve? I would grieve if you should show the least symptom of the mental equipment required to lubricate the brains of the peasantry."

CHAPTER XXV

ON LITERARY CRITICISM

LETTERS, said Bierce, flourish' under the stimulus of virile criticism. Whenever critical literature is at a low estate the general literature of the period is equally weak, characterless, and decadent. America, with the exception of a few outstanding critics, has always been singularly deficient in critical literature, the few outstanding critics, too, have usually been of scattered periods, and in insufficient number in any one period to produce a literature of criticism of catholicity and impressiveness. The American people, then, at no time have had proper guidance at home by an illumined critical intelligence.

In the absence of an informed guide to letters, Bierce held, each decade has been debauched by an unlettered criticism of ignorance so appalling, so degrading, as to render abortive the efforts of the few true voices that struggle to be heard in the development of a worthy literature. The pedant, usually a charlatan, seldom possessed of more than a smattering of the knowledge professed, devoid of intellectual integrity, deliberately misleading his ignorant followers, wreaking his vengeance on the author personally rather than on what he wrote, always disparaging the writer who is beyond his comprehension—the pedant is the bellwether of countless sheep among lesser critics that bleat his "ideas," having none of their own.

As I have already pointed out, Bierce suffered throughout his literary career at the hands of every type of little critic, by many was deliberately misrepresented, and now, after his death, the misrepresentations continue. Many who wrote

of him (and others who still write) were merely echoes, sounding brass or tinkling cymbals, trying to produce tonal unity from scattered sources.

A concrete example of a type of critic—many similar current examples might be given—I now put before my readers, isolating this case for the reason that it bears directly upon the subject of this biography:

In the brief biographical sketch of one Fred Lewis Pattee that appears in *Who's Who in America*, Vol. 15—1928-1929, we are informed that he was born in Bristol, N. H., March 22, 1863; that degrees have been conferred upon him as follows: A.B., Dartmouth, 1888, A.M., 1891, Litt.D., 1921; M.L., 1915; University of Göttingen, 1902-03; University of Marburg, 1910; Litt.D., Lebanon Valley, 1915. We are further informed: Professor American Literature, Pennsylvania State College, since 1894; visiting professor of American Literature, University of Illinois, 1923-24. Among numerous books attributed to him in the biographical sketch are: "A History of American Literature," 1896; "Reading Courses in American Literature," 1897; "The Foundations of English Literature," 1900; "History of American Literature Since 1870," 1915; "The Development of the American Short Story," 1923.

It is interesting to note that "A History of American Literature Since 1870" is published by The Century Company; that "The Development of the American Short Story" is published by Harper & Brothers; furthermore, that both books, in certain quarters, pass as standard works, authoritative, and are frequently consulted by college students.

Let us see how Mr. Pattee's literature of criticism is manufactured. Mark you, here is no exceptional case: I can mention offhand scores of books of literary criticism, written by professed scholars, with numerous honorary degrees, that

have been published within recent years by such houses as Harper & Brothers and The Century Company. A detailed account of how reputations for scholarship in America, made of gas, are acquired is a matter that I shall take up at some length in another book on Bierce to which I have referred in the Preface of this volume. But let us return to our Pattee mutton. I quote in full a letter, which I also photographically reproduce, written by Mr. Pattee, as follows:

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE COLLEGE

STATE COLLEGE, PA.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

State College, Pa.
December 26, 1914.

The Neale Publishing Co.
New York City

Dear Sirs:

I am writing a history of American literature since 1870 which the Century Company is to bring out this autumn and parts of which will appear in the Century Magazine if not crowded out by the war material. I am perplexed at one point: is Ambrose Bierce an important figure? If you so consider him, why do you do so? I confess I have conflicting ideas about him. Sometimes I am inclined to take him at his own estimate and again I consider him a bluff and a "wind-bag". Which is he? Why is he not given more attention in the histories and the critical estimates of American Literature? I am seeking the light. Just as present I am inclined not to mention him at all in the record. How did the collected edition, I have not seen it,—sell? Did its reception make you believe he is a writer with a real place in our literature?

Hoping to hear from you, I am

Very sincerely yours,

FRED LEWIS PATTEE
Professor of English.

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE COLLEGE
STATE COLLEGE, PA.

DÉPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

State College, Pa.
December 26, 1914.

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Hoping to hear from you, I am

Very sincerely yours,

Fred Lewis Pattee
Professor of English.

So, he was perplexed at one point: he was unable to determine if Ambrose Bierce was an important figure; consequently, appealed to the publisher to supply him with an opinion. He was inclined to take Bierce at Bierce's own estimate of himself, which Bierce had never expressed; and, again, Mr. Pattee was disposed to consider Ambrose Bierce to be a bluff and a "wind-bag." "Which is he?" is his piteous appeal to the publisher. "Why is he not given more atten-

tion in the histories and the critical estimates of American Literature?" Poor fellow! He was "seeking the light"—from the publisher. Great was his perplexity: "Just at present I am not inclined to mention him at all in the record." But a brilliant idea occurred to him: his critical estimate might be based on the extent of the sale of *The Collected Works*; so he asks: "How did the collected edition, I have not seen it,—sell?" If the sale had been extensive, we infer, he would have had no difficulty in assigning to Bierce a foremost place in American letters; if the sale had been small, limited to an informed intelligence, he might drop him in disgust. Not his own critical estimate; nay, nay; the public should decide!—the public *en masse*, not a coterie of the intellectual *élite*! He emphasizes by pleonasm his point: "Did its reception make you believe he is a writer with a real place in our literature?"

To Mr. Pattee's letter no reply was vouchsafed. He was left in an awful dilemma. The publishers had made no sound that this rock of criticism could echo. In his confusion, he decided to devote to Bierce a brief paragraph in the book mentioned in his letter—a book comprising 449 pages—and adroitly, as he thought, expressed two contradictory opinions: the reader might take his choice. I refer my readers to *A History of American Literature Since 1870*, by Fred Lewis Pattee. New York: The Century Company: 1915; pages 379-80, the brief paragraph running over from the one page to the other. *Pro*: "... his earlier work displayed a power to move his readers little found outside of Poe. Reserve he has, a directness that at times is disconcerting, originality of a peculiar type, and a command of many of the subtlest elements of the story-telling art..." *Contra*: "... but [Mr. Pattee is a typical "but" critic] lacking sincerity, he fails of permanent appeal . . . But he is not true, he works not in human life as it is actually lived, but in a

Poe-like life that exists only in his own imaginings. In later years journalism took the finer edge from his art and adverse criticism of his work turned him into something like a literary anarchist who criticised with bitterness all things established. A few of his novels may be studied with profit as models of their kind, *but* the greater part of his writings, despite their brilliancy cannot hope for permanence." The italics are mine.

It would be difficult to crowd into a brief paragraph more of confused thought, more of ignorance, more of misstatements.

Bierce began with journalism; he was a journalist throughout his literary career; his short-stories were written from time to time long after his reputation as a journalist had been established. Instead of a man of letters, an imaginative writer in both prose and verse, an essayist, a critic of art in literature, abandoning letters to become a journalist, as Mr. Pattee would have us believe, the journalist increasingly became a power in numerous classifications of literature.

"A few of his novels may be studied with profit as models of their kind. . ." A "few" of many? And why does he not point out which among the few of Bierce's "novels" may be studied with profit as models of their kind? Why did not Mr. Pattee point them out?—for a very good reason: Ambrose Bierce never wrote a novel. If Mr. Pattee had been at all familiar with Bierce's literary work, so he would have known; he simply wrote in crass ignorance—and falsely.

Was the rest of his book entitled *A History of American Literature Since 1870* manufactured in the manner of the paragraph from which I have quoted? I have the right to assume that it was, and such parts of it as I have read would seem to justify the assumption. Thus literary criticism was manufactured in America throughout Bierce's earthly

career; and so it has continued to be made unto this present year of grace. The Pattees are legion.

Nor is the criticism of Ambrose Bierce an isolated instance of Mr. Pattee's unfair methods. To show that it is not, I quote in full the letter of an author, printed in *The Sun*, New York, November 21, 1925, as follows:

TO THE LITERARY EDITOR—*Sir*: What purported to be a review of my work, "The Belgians, First Settlers in New York and in the Middle States," appeared in your issue of September 19. Allow me to make the following remarks:

1. Mr. Fred Lewis Pattee, the reviewer, says that my book "should be what the title page claims, a plain history based upon Dutch and British official reports and on statements of authoritative Dutch and American historians," and he adds: "It proves to be nothing of the sort."

Such an erroneous statement plainly shows that the reviewer did not read the seven chapters (9 to 15) entirely devoted to what is announced on the title page, and, furthermore, that he did not see the seals and maps related to those chapters.

2. According to the reviewer a book must be what the title page sets forth, yet he criticises as unnecessary my chapters on the history of Belgium, the Reformation and the rise of the Dutch republic, three chapters written in accordance with the subtitle of my book. Either the reviewer did not read my subtitle or he forgot his own argument.

3. I am criticised also for having presented other chapters. My preface explains that their purpose is to enable the reader to better understand the entire vast and complicated subject.

My method of presenting the facts has been praised by the Washington *Evening Star*, and William Elliot Griffis, D.D., L.H.D., author of "The Story of the Willows," writes that the book "bears the ineffaceable stamp of genuine scholarship."

4. The assertion made by your reviewer that I have reproduced many pages from "Knickerbocker's History of

New York" is absolutely false, for I have not reproduced a single line from that book.

The article of Mr. Pattee is nothing but a mass of violent attacks on a book showing that the first settlers of New York were Walloons and not Dutch—and this he does not like—but he fails to contradict the real subject of my work—the claims concerning the Walloon settlements.

HENRY G. BAYER.

October 6.

The timidity of literary critics, said Bierce, accounted for the "but" writers among them. The pernicious tendency to qualify every independent opinion, whether censorious or commendatory, he found to be increasing; in fact, already the time had come when unqualified praise, even unqualified condemnation, was considered sophomoric: the critic now must display a "critical" faculty: to him nothing in literature, past or present, may be of the best, nothing of the worst: all must be somewhat good and somewhat bad. So, the little critic sits down and writes of a master's work, and what he says in praise, after a careful analysis of the work under criticism, clearly shows the master to be a master: granting the truth of these conclusions of the critic, logically developed, step by step, it necessarily follows that his qualifying "buts" render his judgment invalid. He has not the wit to see that he is absolutely contradictory. Conversely, if the author under consideration is as bad as the critic holds him to be in some respects, the author simply could not have done the fine things attributed to him by the critic: his affirmations and negations on identical points render his decisions absolutely worthless. Truth to say, the result is no opinion at all. Yet, that is the type of literary criticism that is now the mode, and we are told that the literary critic who praises without reservation and condemns without mercy has no critical faculty and is a mere literary adolescent.

The little critic may be as honest as he is illogical; he may be simply writing *à la mode*; he may be wedded to the academic cap and gown that is worn by all his associates.

But there is the other fellow, vastly in the majority, who is a "but" critic for the reason that he is a coward. Point to his criticism, saying, "Why, you said this!—how could you have done so?" and he immediately turns to a passage in the same critique in which he has asserted quite the contrary view. If you condemn him for being contradictory, he blandly explains that you have failed to catch his meaning, and patronizingly implies that there can be no meeting of minds where the one is so vastly superior to the other.

Both classes of "but" critics get nowhere: they simply sit on a fence between two positives and yowl. He with the trumpet—he who has positive opinions, who knows what to say and how to say it, who fears neither God nor man—he is the critic who is heard. There are a few of them left, not many, and those few point the way to the stars.

Bierce held that the almost complete absence of an informed and a courageous critical literature in America was accountable for the low level of our letters. The environment resulting from ignorant criticism—with our critical literature in the hands of the cheapest of writers, many of them girls still in their teens, others writing as an avocation without pay, and nearly all incapable of appraising anything beyond butter and eggs, or lingerie—the environment resulting could be no other than it was: a wallow of mediocrity in which genius was submerged.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE COLLECTED WORKS

I

AT the time Bierce and I first met, in the spring of 1901, his literary fame had been acquired almost wholly by what he had published in newspapers and in magazines—principally in the former. His books had got him nowhere; but few persons had read them; yet, the bibliography was not inconsiderable, and his books had been published in London, Christiania, and Paris, by Tauchnitz in Leipzig, and issued (hardly *published*) by various printers in the United States. *Cobwebs from an Empty Skull* was first issued in 1874. An edition of *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter* was printed in 1892, but soon afterward the printer failed, and the supply (beyond a few copies) never reached the market. An edition of *Black Beetles in Amber* was also printed in 1892; *Can Such Things Be?* in 1893; *In the Midst of Life* (former title *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*), in 1898; *Fantastic Fables*, in 1899. But none of those publications had been sold beyond a few hundred copies. They had not, in fact—in this country, at least—really been published in the generally accepted meaning of that term, but merely printed. Some were issued at the expense of the author, or at the expense of his friends, and the only compensation he had received as the result of all his literary work as produced in book form, until 1901, was fifty dollars, so he informed me, paid to him as an honorarium by Tauchnitz. Even this small return he did not receive for some years; for Tauchnitz, saying nothing to Bierce about the gratuity, had forwarded the sum to

Bierce's London publisher, who, in turn, had said nothing about it to Bierce, until that author learned that Tauchnitz published nothing by a living writer without compensating him, even when not under the least obligation to do so. Then Bierce ran the sum down, and out—out of the cash-till of the London publisher.

So we find Bierce at the age of fifty-nine widely known as an author on two continents, and to a considerable extent in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, principally through the publication in newspapers and magazines of what he had written, and those newspapers and magazines were published mainly in London and in San Francisco. During the greater part of that time, too, San Francisco was no large city, and the circulation of its newspapers and magazines was small. But little of what he wrote was originally published in London, except in the '70s, when he lived there. Those would seem but narrow channels through which to navigate a mighty ship, fullrigged, and destined to circumnavigate the globe. But so it was.

Thus, at the age of fifty-nine, Bierce had received fifty dollars for all his work that had been issued in book form, and not more than fifty dollars additional when he had reached the age of sixty-six, in 1908, when the Neale house began the publication of *The Collected Works*. Nevertheless, during the period extending from 1901 to 1908 other books by him had been brought out, all financed by either Bierce or his friends, except the two that I had issued and the one issued by Doubleday, Page and Company. The Neale house financed the publication of everything by Ambrose Bierce that it issued, comprising fifteen separate books, and paid him a royalty on every copy sold, which was never less than twenty per cent, and in some instances was twenty-five per cent. In addition, he received one-half the profits from the sale of re-publication rights on all sales

made by The Neale Publishing Company, amounting, in the aggregate, to a considerable sum, and one hundred dollars each for reprints in *Neale's Monthly*.

A new edition of *Can Such Things Be?* was issued by The Neale Publishing Company in 1903, although an edition (Putnam's) that some one or more of Bierce's friends had financed was then in the market, a competitor; and in 1907 the Neale house brought out a new edition of *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter*. Both these books met with indifferent success. *Shapes of Clay* was brought out by W. E. Wood, in San Francisco, in 1903, and was financed by George Sterling, surreptitiously, who was later reimbursed by Bierce. Only a few copies were sold.

In 1906 *The Cynic's Word Book* was published by Doubleday, Page and Company, but only half the alphabet, the publishers becoming discouraged when half the material had been used, and leaving off with one slender volume. Later the full Dictionary was made Volume VII of *The Collected Works* and published with the title as originally selected by Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*—a title that had so appalled Doubleday, Page and Company that Bierce had reluctantly consented to the substitution of the name of *The Cynic's Word Book* for the title of his own selection. He told me that his royalties from Doubleday, Page and Company were insufficient to pay for the few volumes that were billed to him by the publishers, and that he had paid the difference by check.

The Shadow on the Dial and Other Essays was issued by A. M. Robertson, who kept a book store in San Francisco, publication being effected in 1909. I don't know who financed this volume; but, whoever did, lost by its publication, for its sale was light. *Write It Right* was first published in 1909, by the Neale house, and with marked success, several large printings leaving the press in rapid suc-

cession. This manual is not included in *The Collected Works*, although it might well have been, for it contains some of Bierce's richest wit and humor; but the other volumes, *Can Such Things Be?* *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter*, *Shapes of Clay*, *The Cynic's Word Book*, and *The Shadow on the Dial and Other Essays*, were all incorporated in *The Collected Works*. In fact, the twelve volumes that comprise the set embody all of Bierce's life-work in literature that he cared to preserve in permanent form.

All the manuscripts that Bierce got together for book publication after he met me were first offered to the Neale house, except *The Devil's Dictionary*, the material of which he collated at the urgency of Walter Hines Page, whom he saw but once, at a gathering of some of Page's friends at luncheon in New York. My commitments at the different times when the other manuscripts were submitted to me that were not brought out by my house were such that I could not conveniently take up their publication. However, I frankly told Bierce that I would not issue *Shapes of Clay* for still another reason: I had no faith in either its value as literature or in its salability. Here was a mass of verse, sufficient to make two large volumes: good verse, good wit, good humor, keen satire, and a few pieces that I counted good poetry; but I did not esteem this collection as being sufficiently worth while and salable. Indignantly—in fact, with a considerable show of temper—Bierce asked, "What more do you want?" He went on to say that he considered his verse as being his most notable literary achievement, that it would outlive the rest of what he had written, and he almost convinced me that he thought so.

I now concede that I underrated the literary value of Bierce's verse. As verse it is marvelous: surely he was a master of versification. But poet he was not—unless we take the view that he advanced: "A man is a poet who has

written no poetry beyond a single line." Bierce himself was very careful to differentiate the definitions of poetry and verse. Poetry might be both, or it might be prose; verse might be both; and prose might be poetry. True! And Bierce's verse, besides being technically perfect, is otherwise great, superb indeed, with a range greater than that of any other versifier of whom I have knowledge; it is a sheer delight to the reader. Two of the volumes of *The Collected Works* are wholly in verse: Volume IV, *Shapes of Clay*, and Volume V, *Black Beetles in Amber*. In addition, some of his most scintillating wit and some of his cleverest versification are given in illustration of definitions in *The Devil's Dictionary*.

That *Shapes of Clay* had but a small sale as issued in San Francisco does not prove that I was right as to the salability of Bierce's verse, and two or three separate large books of his verse might have been profitably published in 1903, separately, apart from *The Collected Works*, and probably could be profitably issued at this time.

II

Bierce's pecuniary ill-success as an author of books gave me deep concern. This I did not express to him, for I assumed that he was sensitive about the matter, as no doubt he was. By 1908 I had come to have a deep affection for him, and my admiration for his great achievements as an author was no less than profound. That his literary career had been mismanaged, if managed at all, was apparent. The sporadic issuance of his books, without orderly process, without organization, frequently by printers or publishers without financial stability; put out by publishers (or mere printers) with very little knowledge either of the man or his literary work, interested at times and at times not interested at all in the pecuniary success of the single book;

usually the publisher or the printer without sales facilities; a number of both the publishers and the printers men of small mentality and of loose business morals; the literary material in many instances inadequately protected against piracy, and much of it issued without copyright protection—thus an outstanding figure in American literature, in world literature, lived to be sixty-six years old before any effort had been made adequately to place his literary work before the American public in book form. The greater part of that work—indeed, nearly all—was “out of print” in book form; not sold out, by any means, but destroyed by fire, sold as junk, dissipated in bankruptcy sales, and buried in newspaper and in magazine files, when such files were extant. Yes, I was concerned; I was distressed; and I determined to work out a plan by which everything that Bierce had written that he cared to have preserved in permanent form—cared to hand down to generations yet unborn—should be made accessible to everybody everywhere so long as his fame should live. My plans matured, I first laid them before Bierce while at luncheon at Harvey’s in Washington on June 1, 1908. I had brought along with me a tentative contract. It was signed in duplicate at his apartment in the Olympia at nine o’clock in the evening of that day, in the presence of two witnesses.

The contract provided, in brief, that Bierce should collate everything that he had written that he cared to have published in *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce*, whether previously published or not; he to exercise his discretion as to the contents, edit the material, and be given absolutely a free hand in all pertaining to the literary aspects, he agreeing to supply the copy at the rate of at least two volumes a year until all the copy should be delivered; that The Neale Publishing Company should determine all publication matters, take out copyright in the revised copy,

and retain all publication rights for a period of twenty-five years, after which all such rights would revert to him, or to his heirs or assigns; The Neale Publishing Company to defray the entire expense of publication, and pay to Bierce a royalty of twenty per cent on all volumes sold, from the first to the last.

Both parties carried out all the terms of the agreement in letter and in spirit, as they did the terms of a supplemental contract affecting re-publication rights, by which the profits on sales made to syndicates, newspapers, magazines, and to publishers of books should be divided equally between the author and the publisher.

Of course, Bierce could not determine offhand the number of volumes that would be contained in a set of *The Collected Works*, so the tentative number was placed at ten. The actual number proved to be twelve. I gave him *carte blanche* to go beyond twelve, and rather urged him to do so, thinking that at least three more volumes might comprise material that he considered (erroneously, as I thought) not of sufficient importance for permanent preservation.

In reaching his decision not to exceed twelve volumes, I believe he was reacting to the browbeating he had long been receiving from critics, who had questioned the permanent literary value of his writings that were based upon ephemeral events and upon the acts of persons who seemingly counted but little in the game of life. Bierce knew the critics to be wrong; he knew how to use ephemeral events in literature; he knew literature to be no respecter of persons. Literature is great because of "what is said and *how* it is said." Nothing is ephemeral that a great writer makes great, that a great painter paints, that a great sculptor shapes. The statue of Bill Jones may be quite as enduring as the one of Napoleon Bonaparte. Its value in art is not in the least governed by the respective abilities of Bill and

Napoleon. So in literature: Ulysses is great not because he was king of Ithaca but because Homer, the Greek poet, made him great. Homer could have made Bill Jones equally renowned. He made the Trojan war great, his immortal epic great, and had he been alive he could have made the march of Coxey's army fully as famed. At the point of the pen of a great writer who is a master of literary expression, transitory politics, gamin fighting in the street, William Dean Howells spreading fourteen solecisms over a single page of one of his published stories, a Union veteran of the Civil War denouncing a comrade for having sent flowers to decorate the grave of a Confederate soldier—what the great author writes of such persons or events is as enduring in literature as is Bierce's record of *A Baby Tramp* making its way to its unknown mother's grave. After all, one should constantly bear in mind Bierce's dictum: It is not who says a thing, nor who does a thing, that counts: it is what is said about what is done and how it is said.

In his preface to *Black Beetles in Amber*, which is Vol. V of *The Collected Works*, Bierce expresses his attitude toward the use of unknown persons in literature, particularly in regard to his own literary work, saying:

In answer to the familiar criticism that the author has dealt mostly with obscure persons, "unknown to fame," he begs leave to point out that he has done what he could to lessen the force of the objection by dispelling some part of their obscurity and awarding them such fame as he was able to bestow. If the work meet with acceptance commentators will doubtless be "raised up" to give them added distinction and make exposition of the circumstances through which they took attention, whereby the work will have a growing interest to those with the patience to wait.

Further to fortify this *apologia*, I quote from my publishers the following relevant and judicious remarks on a kind of literature that is somewhat imperfectly understood in this night of its neglect.

"In all the most famous satires in our language the victims would now be unknown were it not that they have been preserved 'in amber' by the authors. The enlightened lover of satire cares little of whom it was written, but much for what is said, and more for *how* it is said. No one but critics and commentators troubles himself as to the personality of the always obscure hero of *The Dunciad* and the nobodies distinguished by the pens of Swift, Butler, Wolcott and the other masters of English satire; yet the work of these men is no less read than it was in their day. The same is true of Aristophanes, Horace and the other ancient censors of men and manners."

But at the time Bierce, at the age of sixty-six, began to collate the material that now comprises *The Collected Works*, ignorant literary critics, through long abusiveness, blind prejudice, and deep hatred of the man, to say nothing of jealousy, probably had made dents in the otherwise immaculate statue. Anyhow, Bierce rested his case on twelve volumes.

My plans, put into effect, provided for an impressive and a superb format—for publication in sumptuous style—which should at least convey to the public the belief of the publisher in the enduring values of Bierce's literary work. The type selected was Caslon, pica—that is to say, 12-point—with a 2-point lead. The dimensions of the type-page—the space of the type as printed on the page—was 20 x 35 picas, or $3\frac{1}{8}$ x $5\frac{5}{8}$ inches; the size of the book, 6 x 9 inches, 2 inches thick. The size of the type-page allowed wide margins; the plates, too, could be used for smaller volumes, for trade editions—volumes of the size of the ordinary full-length novel, $5\frac{1}{2}$ x 8 inches. It was decided to print 1250 sets as one run, on one lot of paper, these sets to be bound in three styles, and to differ in binding only. The autographed edition was to be limited to 250 sets, the first volume of each set to be autographed by Bierce, and each set

to be numbered consecutively from 1 to 250 inclusive. All these plans were put into effect.

This autographed edition is truly superb. Printed on rag paper of a superior quality, made especially for *The Collected Works*, the same paper being used in all the other sets, care was taken to select for the binding the finest Levant skins obtainable—an unpolished brown leather of a shade approaching tan. Then a search was made for a highly-skilled binder. The right man was found, Walter Roache, a German, whose leather binding was all done by his own hand, in a small shop in New York. He has been dead for a number of years. The old German probably did the best work of his life in the binding of the autographed edition, hand-wrought throughout. Front, back, and backbone were blind-stamped by dies made from a design by Frederick Polley, this covering the entire external binding, with one ornament and the lettering worked with 22-karat gold on the front. In addition, the inner margins of leather, framing the silk linings, were ornamented with a design developed in 22-karat gold. The linings, comprising the covering of the boards, and used in the place of end papers and fly-leaves, were of moiré silk, of a rich red, so that, upon opening the book and upon closing it, one was confronted by two pages of rich, glowing moiré silk, facing each other, the color blending with the soft tan-brown of the leather and with the gold decorations.

Naturally, an edition so superb caused widespread comment among men of letters. Such things had not been done in America before. Said the *London Saturday Review*: "The binding and the printing are perfect, recalling the best productions of Colburn and Rivingtons at the beginning of the last century." "Published in sumptuous style," said the *London Athenaeum*.

Bierce's enemies among book reviewers were affronted.

Loud were their outcries: "Potatoes set in platinum!" "Turnips in Tiffany's window!" "Pure piffle in plush pants!" were some of the derisive comments. *The New York Times* turned over a set of the autographed edition to Hildegard Hawthorne to review, as expressive of the contempt of the editor, and she did her best, or damndest, to make Bierce ridiculous, little realizing how ridiculous she was making herself the while. Later Bierce transfixed her with his shafts of wit, referred to her as "Haw!-Haw!-Hawthorne," and did her to a turn in *The Collected Works*. The late Franklin K. Lane, at one time Secretary of the Interior, personally wrote to one of his newspapers this withering condemnation: "Ambrose Bierce is a hideous monster, so like the mixture of dragon, lizard, bat and snake as to be unnameable." Later, realizing his mistake, finding that Bierce was rapidly reaching international distinction, the Honorable Franklin rushed madly toward the Biercean band-wagon and endeavored to jump onto its running-board; but the publication of *The Collected Works* had at first given him deep offense.

However, *The Collected Works* soon put Bierce where he belonged: in the first rank of world authors. The autographed edition, long out of print, is now offered for sale by dealers in rare books at \$500, or more, a set. There are but few sets obtainable at any price.

I find it amusing to note that one of Bierce's ardent admirers, a San Francisco woman, was not satisfied with the binding of the autographed edition; so, desiring a binding exclusively her own, she ripped off the Neale covers and had a man in San Francisco, at a charge to her of \$600, rebind the set for her—in a manner sufficiently garish to match her flamboyant surroundings.

The autographed edition was sold by the Neale house mainly by mail, at the full price, \$120 a set. The margin of

profit to the publishers was small, if any, and the binding alone would now cost more than \$120 a set. A justifiable charge for this edition at the time of its publication would have been \$250, or even more. The possessor now has mechanical values worth \$500 a set.

Sheets of this first printing were also bound in half-morocco, a green leather, with the sides marbled in green and gold, and the same marbled paper was used as fly-leaves and end sheets, just as the moiré silk was used in the autographed edition. The only decoration was the lettering on the backbone. The tops were gilded. All the edges—top, bottom, and side—of the autographed edition were gold. The edges of all three editions—cloth, half-morocco, and full-morocco—were trimmed. Bierce was averse to uncut leaves and deckled edges. He saw no reason why a nuisance of past centuries should be inflicted upon the present generation. I let him have his way; in fact, made no protest. The half-morocco edition was sold at \$72 a set. It was the least salable of the three editions.

Sheets of the first printing were also bound in cloth—a gray buckram, beautiful, but sombre. Some of these sets had gilt tops; the rest, plain edges. The price was \$30 a set. All the first printing, 1250 sets, have long since been sold. There is no edition of *The Collected Works* now in the market, except those sold by dealers in rare books, who get a set infrequently from some former subscriber. The ornament used for the autographed edition (simply the initials A B in a decorative setting) was also used on the front cover of the cloth edition. The lettering of all bindings was on the backbone alone. More of the cloth-bound set were sold than of any other.

III

In numerous different ways Bierce's enemies tried to dis-

credit both himself and his publisher when they found that *The Collected Works* were to be published. One or two examples will suffice:

The announcement of the *édition de luxe*, to be autographed, and to be limited to two hundred and fifty sets, each set to be numbered, was isolated from the announcement of the other editions (all the editions to be published simultaneously) and the report was circulated that the publisher refused to print more than two hundred and fifty sets, he saying that Bierce would be fortunate indeed if the world could supply him with two hundred and fifty subscribers. Taking up these reports, a few of the thoughtless among Bierce's friends spread them, saying that the publisher had disgusted him, the printing being so small. I have no reason to think that these canards ever reached Bierce's ears. There was the contract of publication, a copy of which he held, and which he showed to many. Among its provisions were clauses that provided that, for the term of the contract, twenty-five years, the publisher was obligated to print as many and as large editions as should be required to supply purchasers. Consequently, if Bierce had heard the reports, he would have denied their truth, not only in his own interest but as a matter of simple justice. Type-plates were to be made, and were made, comprising nearly five thousand plates, with extra copper deposits, good for numerous runs, up to fifty thousand impressions. It mattered not at all, then, if the printings should have comprised only one set at a time, if no more could be sold—or a demand for no more than one set a month—for a new printing could be made within thirty days. As a matter of fact, the first printing was twelve hundred and fifty sets, comprising fifteen thousand volumes, two hundred and fifty sets of which were incorporated in the full-morocco *édition de luxe*, and were duly autographed by the author.

Let us submit this malicious gossip of Bierce's enemies to analysis: here was an enterprise upon which the publisher was launched requiring an expenditure of more than forty thousand dollars to bring it to completion. More than forty thousand dollars *were* expended: nevertheless, these ignorant and malicious gossips would have their equally ignorant hearers believe that only two hundred and fifty sets were to be printed, and that Bierce, with this knowledge, entered into the contract of publication. So far as publishers, booksellers, and all others familiar with the making of books were concerned, they of course knew that, however small the first printing, it could be followed within a brief period by a further and a larger printing from the type-plates. If the first printing had been one hundred thousand sets, would the sale have been the larger? Do the salability of a book and the extent of its sale depend upon the number of volumes first printed? If so, and if merely to print a great number of books is all that is necessary to effect their sale, every author and every publisher would grow wealthy overnight.

As another example of viciousness, or witlessness, the report was spread that Bierce disapproved of art in the making of books. They said that he preferred books printed on cheap paper, made of wood-pulp, and bound in cheap paper, and that a well-made book aroused his ire. Yet Bierce took the greatest pleasure in assisting Frederick Polley and me in designing the format of each of the three editions. He helped to select the paper, the morocco skins, the face of type, and in all else gave his counsel.

At first he did not wish the first printing to comprise more than one thousand sets, saying that this would be sufficient for quite a while, and that the work might be extended beyond ten volumes, as it was—extended to twelve volumes to the set. There were several other reasons that he gave for

holding that the first printing should not be larger, and it was at my urgency that twelve hundred and fifty copies of each volume were first printed, allowing two hundred and fifty sets for the *édition de luxe* and one thousand sets for the cloth and the half-morocco bindings. There was never a time after the volumes were first printed when they were not obtainable from the publisher until the sale had become so slight that it seemed desirable that trade editions should be printed from the original plates, and for the purpose of such trade editions the plates were turned over to other publishers, first the plates of two volumes to Boni and Live-right, then the plates of all twelve volumes to Albert & Charles Boni. Those same plates that I made are still in perfect condition and from them can be printed from forty thousand to fifty thousand sets, on short notice, if it should be considered desirable by the publishers to offer for sale both trade editions and subscription editions in sets simultaneously.

The poor naturals may yet get it into their heads that no publisher will fail to supply to the public as many books by Ambrose Bierce as it will buy. They may yet get it into their heads, too, that a publisher, having set something like four millions of ems of type, having made nearly five thousand pages of copper type-plates, having conducted an enterprise requiring more than forty thousand dollars, would not limit the number of sets of any such literary work to two hundred and fifty sets; furthermore, would not print the books on wood-pulp paper, bind them in paper of the same quality, and then put the list price at fifty cents a volume. I suppose it would be useless to ask the poor nitwits whence the author and the publisher expected to derive their profits, or the publisher get back more than a small fraction of his expenditure, if there were any truth in their gossip.

I do not find it strange that the gossips who know so much

of the relationship that existed between Ambrose Bierce and The Neale Publishing Company have not consulted the records of the recorders of deeds of New York and Washington, which reveal that The Neale Publishing Company in the course of financing *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce* found it necessary to borrow seven thousand and five hundred dollars, and in doing so secured its bank by a chattel mortgage. This transaction was unknown to Bierce. Within less than six months The Neale Publishing Company had paid off the mortgage, a release had been filed, and all the documents in the matter are open to the examination of the public, since they are on record in both New York and Washington. The loss of forty thousand dollars by the publishers at that time would have been fatal to their house; but they were willing to stake their all on Ambrose Bierce, did so, and won the stake for both. In his last interview, in New Orleans, Bierce related how he was a participant in the profits, receiving royalties sufficient for his needs.

Bierce, in common with many other men, numbered fools among his friends. Among his enemies were naturals of the same intellectual caliber as were to be found among his friends. They vied with one another, on the one hand designedly and viciously, on the other hand ignorantly and in what they thought was his service—to the discredit of both him and his publisher. That these were making themselves ridiculous to everybody with a modicum of wit was of course not apparent to them. They are keeping it up, and thus adding to the gaiety of letters.

The high regard in which Bierce held me, both the man and the publisher, is too well known to be emphasized here. Hundreds of letters that he wrote to me attest that regard. I publish one of them, as follows:

WASHINGTON, D. C.

DEAR NEALE,

I shall be pleased to see the reviews and other clippings that you are good enough to send.

Your cheeky assertion that you are "the best publisher in America" commands my reluctant assent. But I want you, as I said, to be also the "foremost." That will not come about in a day, but it is bound to come about if you are "spared," though I shall not be spared to know it. Keep your trap set and baited for that ten million dollars capital and the animal will some day walk in.

I'm glad you saw Miss Campbell, and hope you liked her.

Miss Christiansen and I are going to dine down town on New Year's eve. Please come prepared to join us. To meet you, I am going to ask a very bright and charming young woman, Miss Shipman, who, knowing some of your detractors, has had the folly to entertain a bad opinion of you. After dinner we will come up here to my shack and welcome the new year. Please don't disappoint us; give the other girl another evening.

I've a lovely picture of Annette Franklin, my godchild.

Fire some proofs in this direction.

Sincerely yours,

AMBROSE BIERCE.

December 26, 1910.

The Neale house no longer has any proprietary right in *The Collected Works*, all such rights having been sold some years ago to Albert and Charles Boni, including re-publication rights salable to magazines and newspapers and to other publishers of books. Hence, I have no further pecuniary interest in *The Collected Works*, nor shall I profit by the further sale indirectly. This I mention for the reason that this biography in no manner affects my pecuniary welfare other than by the proceeds of its sale. I am not advertising *The Collected Works*. I am free to say what I please about Bierce, in praise or in condemnation, with no other restraint than that imposed by my sense of fitness.

Perhaps I should call attention to the fact that bastard sets are sometimes offered for sale by dealers in rare books. Such sets have been re-bound after having been damaged by their users. Other sets are made by assembling odd volumes from here and there. Still others purport to have been autographed by Bierce, when, as a matter of fact, the autograph may be genuine yet written on a sheet that had been signed by Bierce to replace any damaged in binding. His autograph was intended to apply to the autographed edition only—to the sets bound in full morocco.

IV

While, as I have said, everything written by Bierce that was issued by The Neale Publishing Company was entirely financed by that house, neither Bierce nor anybody else contributing a penny, it may be well to add that some time after the contract of publication relating to *The Collected Works* was executed, some time in January, 1909, Bierce voluntarily came to me and said that he would like to purchase a small block of the capital stock (treasury stock) of The Neale Publishing Company, and was rather insistent. He wanted at least \$1,000 at par. I consented. Two years later, in February, 1911, he again came to me and said that he would like to increase his holding by \$1,000. Again I consented, and that total of \$2,000 was the full sum that The Neale Publishing Company ever received from Bierce, except for the few books that he purchased from time to time, supplied to him at the wholesale trade rate. Neither I personally nor The Neale Publishing Company, nor any of the Company's employees, ever received any other sum from Bierce, from first to last.

As the result of his investment in treasury stock, \$1,000 in January, 1909, and \$1,000 in February, 1911, he and his assigns had received in cash in dividends up to January,

1914, about the time of his death, \$1,416, and in stock dividends \$1,480, a total of \$2,896. Shortly after the completion of *The Collected Works*, The Neale Publishing Company had paid to him and to his assigns in royalties, in cash, \$2,014.51; in merchandise, \$214.78, and a considerable sum on re-publication rights, up to January 2, 1915.

v

The sale of *The Collected Works* went slowly at first, which both Bierce and I attributed to the hostility of his enemies and, in a less degree, to the time taken by the purchasers to read the twelve volumes. His death occurred about two years after the issuance of the last volume, but not before he felt assured of an income from The Neale Publishing Company that would be sufficient to supply his needs for the rest of his life. As a matter of fact, if he had lived he would have found his income steadily increasing, and rapidly, not only his royalties increasing, but the sale of re-publication rights bringing in large returns, while a new market for additional literary work would have been open to him.

As I have said elsewhere in this biography, Bierce has never been a salable author—not his literary work in book form. In this he is not unlike Poe, Hawthorne, Balzac, and De Maupassant—in the United States. Here we are supposed to have read all these authors, everything they have ever written; but, as a matter of fact, the booksellers tell us that they are unsalable, and that only a few hundred volumes of any book by any of these authors are sold in the course of a year in this country, if so many. An educated man may intelligently discuss Poe, for example, for he has read brief sketches of him time and again, and perhaps he has read one or two of his short stories, or several of his poems; but it would be interesting to learn how many edu-

cated men have bought any book by Poe, or by any of the other authors whose names I have mentioned. Harold Bell Wright is probably more extensively read in America than all our great authors of literature combined, and all those of other nations who are counted great, if we except the compulsory reading of the classroom. Shakespeare, Goethe, Molière!—Mr. Wright is justified in holding his digits at his nose!

CHAPTER XXVII

HIS END

I

TOWARD the end of the year 1913, or early the next year, Ambrose Bierce disappeared, never to be seen again. His dead body has never been discovered.

Despite the fact that numerous persons were long aware that he intended to take his own life, and have good reason to think he did so, unless he died by accident while on his way to his last earthly habitat, fanciful writers (usually journalists, for pay) have fabricated numerous accounts of the manner in which he encountered death. Their descriptions have been filled with details; their fidelity to imaginary incidents, most commendable. If these romancers had met any of Bierce's close associates of the last ten years of his life, or otherwise had been in communication with them, they could have got together a true account that would have been as interesting as the false, if not so romantic. For, many years before Bierce disappeared, he had told his friends privately, and some of his acquaintances publicly, that he intended to die by his own hand before he should be so advanced in years as to be in danger of senility.

I recall one occasion, fully ten years before Bierce was lost to sight, when he and a number of friends and acquaintances (and persons who were strangers to him) were gathered in the Coffin Room of the Raleigh Hotel, smoking and drinking. The conversation turned to suicide—an act that he held to be justifiable under numerous circumstances—and he said that he not only intended to take his own life before senility should set its hold upon him but intended to

select the place where he would return to clay. There was no doubt in my mind (I was present) or in that of anybody else who listened, so far as I could judge of others, that Bierce spoke with full sincerity. Among the listeners-in, seated at a nearby table, was the late General Joseph C. Breckenridge, then, or formerly, Inspector-General of the United States Army, who seemed aghast. I was probably the only person present who was aware of his identity.

Time and again Bierce seriously discussed with me and with others his fixed determination to kill himself unless he should die a natural death in the meanwhile, and estimated that he would do so at about seventy, saying that he doubted if he should defer the act much beyond that age. With advancing years, the aged lost to some degree their strength of purpose, and he might fail in courage if older than seventy.

"And bear in mind," he would say, "great courage is required to take one's own life. The strongest instinct implanted in every living creature is the preservation of his life. However brave a man, however fearlessly he may meet death in the ordinary course of nature, or while facing violence at the hands of others, he instinctively holds back his own hand when it would smite him with death. To be sure, a suicide may also be a coward, choosing the less of two evils, and, in taking his own life, disregard the consequences to others dependent upon him. But there are circumstances under which the death of a man would not materially affect any human being except himself. Whether or not he takes his life under those circumstances, is purely a matter of his own election: no problem of ethics is involved. A man might even deem it his duty to kill himself."

Within twelve months of his disappearance, one of his close associates, a young man, possessed of one of the finest minds I have ever encountered, and now a distinguished

scientist, while in Germany purchased a revolver as a present for Bierce, which the latter thereupon said he would use when the time should come for him to blow out his brains. That would be the manner of his passing: a shot through the brain: that was the soldier's way, the decent method. Bierce told me that the weapon, some recent invention, was a thing of beauty. He never showed it to me.

*At a meeting of The G. Club
(Priscilla Shipman, Carrie Christ-
iansen and Ambrose Bierce
present) it was unanimously
resolved that whereas it is
only four days from here to the
Grand Cañon of the Colorado,
in Arizona, through an interest-
ing country, The Stealer be
officially asked to accompany
the expedition to that point.*

Sincerely yours,

Ambrose Bierce.

May 27, 1912.

About a year before he disappeared he took a journey through the Yellowstone National Park, explored parts of the Cañon of the Colorado, and somewhere in the gorge of the Colorado selected the place of his last earthly habitat. This was in the summer of 1912. I photographically reproduce the postscript of a letter that he wrote to me before

he left for the West, doing so mainly in order to give a specimen of the strength of his handwriting at the age of seventy. It displays none of the feebleness of age. I do not offer it as evidence that he had set out to find his cenotaph. Nevertheless, there he found it—and photographed it. He showed me a photograph of the exact location, which I think he himself had taken with a kodak, and pointed out that there he would be protected from vultures.

“Neale,” he said earnestly, “vultures have been pecking at my vitals all my life, and I solemnly swear that the buzzards of the air, although not so foul as the human kind, shall not feed on my dead body.”

From the time that he selected his trysting-place with Death until we last met he would, intermittently, refer to the rendezvous—not in anticipation of joy in the prospective encounter, nor yet in sorrow, but with calm indifference. It was part of an orderly process, far more to be desired than death in bed, preceded by the ravages of illness, devoured by microbes while still alive. He should become (rather, remain) one with the “unceasing suns” and eternity, while in the flesh of physical health and mental strength. That he fulfilled his fixed purpose, I have not the least doubt.

The more fanciful of the journalists—men who could not have known Bierce nor have read understandingly anything he had written—declared that he had met his death while serving with Villa’s forces in Mexico. Now, Bierce had roundly denounced Villa time and again throughout that bandit’s stormy career, and his entire sympathy was with the Carranzistas. He had upheld Carranza and had given to him his moral support. That Bierce could have become a member of Villa’s rabble band is unthinkable. One journalist, knowing how impossible it was to visualize Bierce as a Villista, placed him as a Carranza spy in Villa’s army, and

pictured the bandit chief backing him up against a stone wall. Another journalist had him grovelling before Villa, meeting death on his knees, with a firing-squad in action. Numberless "eye-witnesses" were brought forward to testify.

The absurdity of it! This old man, in his seventy-second year, for many years a sufferer from asthma, had gone into the most asthmatic country in the world, there, on the flat alkali plains, to wheeze out his life! I have no doubt that the reason why he took the Southern Pacific route to the Grand Cañon of the Colorado was in order to avoid asthma—not that he would be certain to escape its clutches, but for the reason that during his last trip from California to Washington, by a northern route, he had to interrupt his journey several times in order to wrestle with his only disease-Nemesis.

II

Bailey Millard, formerly city editor of the *San Francisco Examiner*, and later editor of the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, in a signed article published in the *Philadelphia Ledger*, of November 29, 1914, said:

When Villa rose against Huerta and the Constitutionalists rushed to arms, Bierce, who was a Northern captain in the Civil War, and was breveted major for exceptional gallantry, went to Mexico and joined the staff of that doughty general. After the battle of Torreon he was missing, and has not been heard from since. Neither his daughter, Mrs. H. D. Cowden, of Bloomington, Ill., nor his secretary, Miss Carrie Christiansen, of Washington, with each of whom he corresponded regularly, has had any word from him for nine months.

If neither his daughter nor his "secretary" had heard from him for nine months, they had not heard since February, 1914, or two months after he last wrote to me; but it is highly improbable that his "secretary" heard from him

after he left her, in Washington, after their long-continued quarrel, terminating in their final separation, when he left her forever.

III

As to Bierce's daughter, few were the letters that she ever received from him, and in his latter years their intercourse was infrequent indeed, either by personal contact or by mail. That he should have written to her after he left Washington, seems to me doubtful. If she had received such a letter, I can imagine no good reason why she should not have shown it—any letter that Bierce, under the circumstances, might have written to her. Yet, in the *New York Evening Sun* of April 3, 1915, more than fifteen months after Bierce's disappearance, was published a dispatch dated at Bloomington, Ill., April 3, 1915, from which I quote as follows:

Mrs. Helen Cowden of this city cast light upon the whereabouts of her father, Ambrose Bierce, the 73-year-old American soldier and journalist, who has been mourned as dead since December, 1913. She received a letter from him yesterday in which he wrote that he was fighting with the Allies in France as a member of General Kitchener's staff, and had seen active service at the front.

The same day, April 3, 1915, the *New York World* published a dispatch dated the previous day, April 2, at Bloomington, Ill., from which I quote:

The mystery which has surrounded the disappearance of Major Ambrose Bierce, author and journalist, who has been sought by his family for several months, was cleared up today when a letter from him was received by his daughter, Mrs. Helen Cowden of this city.

It brought the surprising information that her father was a staff officer in Lord Kitchener's army and was fighting for the Allies in Europe. He left Mexico early last

fall, he wrote, and had since been actively engaged at the front in France. He said that he had escaped injury and was in good health.

In view of similar dispatches, as published throughout this country, the *Washington Post* sent a reporter to interview Miss Christiansen, which interview was published in the *Post* of April 4, 1915, from which I quote as follows:

No credence is placed by Miss Carrie Christiansen in the report from Bloomington, Ill., that Maj. Ambrose Bierce, Washington author and newspaper man, is fighting for the Allies in Europe. Miss Christiansen served as Maj. Bierce's secretary while he was in Washington. The report stated that a letter had been received from Maj. Bierce by his daughter, Mrs. Helen Cowden of Bloomington, saying that he was a staff officer with the Allies.

"This story was first published in newspapers in California, where Maj. Bierce formerly made his home," said Miss Christiansen last night at her apartment in the Olympia. "I received clippings from the California papers several days ago and mailed the story to Mrs. Cowden. I am sure that is the way the report gained circulation in its present form, and that the story has been garbled. I feel sure, as do Maj. Bierce's relatives, that he would have communicated with us had he been still alive. We believe that he is dead in Mexico."

Apparently the *Post* went further while investigating the matter in Bloomington, for, immediately following the interview with Miss Christiansen above quoted, the *Post* published the following dispatch, dated at Bloomington, Ill., April 3, 1915:

Mrs. Helen Cowden, daughter of Maj. Ambrose Bierce, declined today to give out the letter received from her father yesterday and which it is understood detailed his movements since he disappeared in Mexico. She said, however, that her father was attached to Kitchener's army in France.

Why did Mrs. Cowden decline to give out the "letter?" Why did she refuse to show it to anybody, either then or at any subsequent time? So far as I have been able to discover, she never showed it to anyone, and I have never heard of a copy of it having been made. To satisfy me that it was ever written, I would have to see the "letter" itself, or a photostatic reproduction of it. I could not be fooled into mistaking an imitation of Bierce's handwriting for his true script. Surely the "letter," if ever existent, was of sufficient importance to have been exhibited! If it contained any matter so personal as to be kept unrevealed by Mrs. Cowden, those parts of public interest only might have been photographed and then published.

Nor have I ever seen a published denial by the then Mrs. Cowden of the Bloomington dispatches, nor a denial by her of their accuracy; nor have I heard that she denied receiving the letter mentioned in the dispatches that she professed her father had written to her.

That she never received such a letter seems to be implied in a letter she wrote to me in long hand, dated December 2, 1916, which is now in my possession and before me while I write. Had she forgotten the Bloomington dispatches of twenty months previous? I take this excerpt from the letter to me:

How my father would have enjoyed this European war!!

According to the Bloomington dispatches and interviews, he had been in that war, whether or not he had enjoyed it.

It will be noted that Miss Christiansen, according to the interview with her as published in the *Washington Post*, was sure that Bierce would have communicated with her and with his relatives if he had been yet alive. I take this to mean that neither she nor his relatives had received any communi-

cation from him after he disappeared. She and his relatives other than the then Mrs. Cowden certainly made numerous statements to the same effect. Mrs. Cowden—Bib, Bierce's daughter, now Mrs. Isgrigg—is the only person, so far as I am aware, who has ever professed to have heard directly from Bierce since January, 1914, and even so I think likely the wrong month was inadvertently given: January, 1914, instead of December, 1913. Probably the last letter he ever wrote was written to me from Laredo, Texas, either in November or December, 1913. At the present instant the letter is not in my possession, so I am unable to determine the month.

III

While I never saw Miss Christiansen after Bierce disappeared, we wrote to each other frequently, and in no letter to me did she either say or imply that she had heard from him since they parted in Washington either in the summer or the early autumn of 1913. I feel certain that she never received any letter from him after their last personal interview.

A number of press accounts are to the effect that he wrote to Miss Christiansen from Chihuahua, for the purpose of acknowledging a draft that he had received from her; but none of the accounts that I have read went further than that bald statement: no date, no publication of the letter, no publication of an excerpt from the letter, no circumstance of any kind. Certainly Miss Christiansen in none of the many letters she wrote to me after Bierce's disappearance either said or implied that she had received a word from him, either directly or indirectly, after he left Washington. Simple analysis shows the improbability that she should be sending any one or more drafts to him. Was she to take the risk of reaching him in Mexico amid

the turmoil of a revolution? What sort of mail service had Villa the bandit? Was she to reach Bierce by mail while he would be journeying astride a donkey across the trackless Andes? Was Bierce so thoughtless as to leave on a wild trip that would extend over several years without making provision for funds that would be available at any point that he might reach? Was he so careless as to set out with only sufficient money to enable him to get to Chihuahua? Furthermore, Bierce had left Washington without supplying any forwarding address at the Army and Navy Club, where he received his mail, and had left word at the club to return to the writers, unopened, all mail for him delivered at that address, where the names and addresses of the writers were known, and, where not known, to hand the letters to the postman as being unclaimed.

Again, he and Miss Christiansen shared a safety deposit box in a bank vault in Washington, and when Bierce took his departure the keys went with him. Miss Christiansen, long afterward, applied to the courts for an order permitting her to have the strong-box opened by force. If she had been in contact with Bierce, why had he not returned the keys to her?

Innumerable are the circumstances that so converge as to show conclusively that Bierce left Washington to go to his death, a suicide, in accordance with his often expressed determination. His plans were all laid with that definite purpose in view. He heard no call of battle; he was in his seventy-second year; he was frequently expressing his disinclination to leave his armchair. Nobody seems to have heard before he left Washington one word from him of any intention to participate in the Mexican brawl; but he probably saw how he could make more effective his camouflage by piling on Mexican tales, and doubtless this thought came to him only after he had finished his lonely tour of

the Western battlefields—if such a tour he took, and I am inclined to think he did. Did the sight of the old battlefields again give to him the war urge? I think not. The battlefields over which he and I walked time and again gave him no such urge, nor did those that he visited with Pollard, and the Spanish-American War, which occurred when he was still capable of bearing arms, left him cold. There had been wars a-plenty, too, in which he might have participated, occurring a few years apart throughout his life. He took part in none, except the Civil War, and there, as he told me, he had had his fill of warfare.

At the time Bierce disappeared he had not been on a horse for many years. I wonder how long he, in his old age, could have remained on the back of one of Villa's bucking bronchos? The serenity of his latter years was not to be broken at the age of seventy-two by anything but asthma,¹ of which he always stood in dread, and which the romancers would have us believe he courted in Mexico.

IV

Particularly agile in spreading reports of Bierce's death was a man with whom the Major came in contact many years ago in San Francisco. To his inventive genius principally are to be traced the numerous conflicting accounts (even the romancer's own accounts conflicting with one another) that have been disseminated. They were all out of the whole cloth. His acquaintance with Bierce was hardly more than casual, and was of brief duration so far as their intercourse was concerned, and, even so, was intermittent. The acquaintanceship, formed late in the year 1886, ran a checkered course and, such as it was, Bierce barely tolerated it and sought time and again to terminate it, each time thinking he had done so, according to the accounts that I received from him—which accounts seem to have been

borne out by his physical acts and published utterances. But, despite rebuffs, cuffs, and a broken head, which Bierce said he had bestowed, followed by public denials of the inventor's word, he would bob up while Bierce was alive, greatly to his annoyance, and has pursued him in death. Again and again Bierce would write to him, in discouragement of his importunities—letters the most condemning that he could fashion—but all to no effect: he continued to put Bierce on edge by his insolence, ignorance, and lack of sensibility. After the disappearance of the Major—long enough afterward to leave no doubt that he was dead—this fabricator blossomed into full flower as one of Bierce's dearest friends, his bosom associate for long, long years, beautiful years of love, during which they had passed the precious hours with their arms about each other's shoulders, reluctant to lose a second of intellectual and spiritual communion.

Not content to bask in the reflected radiance of Ambrose Bierce, in recent years this bearer of the cap and bauble has taken to his bosom, as tenderly as could a maiden, the literary giants of the Pacific Coast of a generation ago, now that all are dead—Frank Pixley, Joaquin Miller, William C. Morrow, Arthur McEwen, Robert Duncan Milne, Henry Derby Bigelow, and all the rest of the stalwarts—and tells how they all have reveled in his love. What a dear precocious youth! At the age of twenty he was so far spiritually and intellectually developed that Ambrose Bierce fell down and worshiped him! So did all the others. Soon he dominated Californian journalism and letters, did this slight youth; but even so he treated gently the middle aged and the elderly writers who surrounded him. Yes, he treated them gently, for he loved them all; and oh, how they all loved him!

I understand that recently this *arbiter literarum*, now

grown old, is seeking structural assistance among men who know how to write in order to erect a pantheon to the literary gods of the Pacific Coast, that edifice to bear over its portal the inscription "I and Ambrose Bierce," although intended also to enshrine minor immortals. In each of many niches there will be a dentist's chair occupied by a god holding aloft *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter* in his good right hand, his left hand resting gently on the curly head of the kneeling Bierce, while Richard Voss, floating above, looks benignly through the aureole of the complacent seated divinity.

I shall not mention the changing polyglot mortal names of this god and thus further his chief avocation in life: the search for notoriety. Already he has succeeded in cementing Bierce's name onto a dental chair. That he has done so notoriously, shamelessly, and unjustifiably matters to him not at all. He had rather live through the ages as the cuffed sycophant to a great literary genius than to journey decently through life and go the lethal way of all good dentists. What a pity thus to disturb Bierce as he lies in his niche beside the waters of the Colorado!

The dental solicitude for art comprehends more than literature: music and its votaries he also holds within his care:

At the time Caruso was tried in New York on the charge of having jostled a woman in the monkey-house in Central Park, of which charge he was convicted, this *fidus Achates* who now engages our attention rushed forward to testify as a witness for the great singer. He was with his "dear friend" Caruso at the time, he swore, and no such crime took place as that with which the defendant stood charged. Perhaps his testimony brought about Caruso's conviction.

"Monkey-house!" exclaimed Bierce when I showed him the newspaper accounts of the testimony—"I have no doubt he *was* in the monkey-house—in the cage!"

V

That George Sterling was aware that Ambrose Bierce would take his own life when about seventy years of age, unless he should die a natural death in the meantime, I know full well. Bierce, Sterling, and I, when together, discussed the matter several times, and Sterling knew that Bierce meant what he said. Sterling remembered, too—how could he have forgot!—and after Bierce had been so long silent that his death seemed assured, Sterling penned a noble poem, from which I quote two stanzas, from the collection of poems published in his volume entitled *Sails and Mirage and Other Poems*, San Francisco; A. M. Robertson, MDCCCXXI:

THE PASSING OF BIERCE

Dream you he was afraid to live?
 Dream you he was afraid to die?
 Or that, a suppliant of the sky,
 He begged the gods to keep or give?
 Not thus the shadow-maker stood,
 Whose scrutiny dissolved so well
 Our thin mirage of Heaven or Hell—
 The doubtful evil, dubious good. . . .

If now his name be with the dead,
 And, where the gaunt agaves flow'r,
 The vulture and the wolf devour
 The lion-heart, the lion-head,
 Be sure that heart and head were laid
 In wisdom down, content to die;
 Be sure he faced the Starless Sky
 Unduped, unmurmuring, unafraid.

When sending a copy of the foregoing poem to me, and in connection with it, Sterling wrote that he surmised Bierce had died by his own hand. If he had thought otherwise, the poem would have been different, particularly if he had

thought Bierce had been killed in battle, or by a firing-squad.

Why, then, should Sterling have aided and abetted others in circulating false accounts of Bierce's disappearance, even himself publishing such untrue versions? Strange are the ways of the gods! Here follows the way that particular god, or devil, helped to spread unfounded rumors. They were never more than rumors, originally put out by liars, "fabricated from cobwebs in empty skulls," to use a Biercean expression. In an article by Sterling entitled *The Shadow Maker*, in *The American Mercury* of September, 1925, some four years after the poem on Bierce's death was written, the following words appear:

Bierce had crossed the border, joined Pancho Villa's army, and was to pass into oblivion within a few weeks. He did manage to send out a few letters, mostly, I believe, to his daughter and to Miss Karen Christiansen [If he had kept his two feet on the ground he would have given her name the English spelling of Carrie, as conferred upon her by her parents, and as invariably signed by her!], now dead. From these communications we learn that he took an active part in the fighting. In fact, to remove any impression among the Villistas that he could possibly be a spy, he took a rifle, on one occasion, and being an excellent marksman, picked off in succession twelve of the Carranzista soldiers!

It has been both affirmed and denied that he was with Villa at the battle of Torreon. Shortly after that time he passed without authentic trace into the unknown. At the close of the war, prospectors, Mexican officers and our entire consular force were interrogated for news of his fate, but only silence or the vaguest of rumors have come back. The latest report is a verbal [perhaps he meant *oral*] one, that of a soldier of fortune in one of the Mexican armies, who asserts that to his positive knowledge Bierce was captured by Carranzista irregulars and shot as a spy. Antedating that assertion is the tale of a San Francisco reporter lately out of Mexico City, who claims that in a restaurant there he met the Mexican leader of a guerilla

band who told him of their capture, in 1915, near Icamoli, of a tall, ruddy-faced, white-haired American whom they shot in company with several humbler suspects. The reporter states in addition that the officer bore a small snapshot of Bierce, evidently detached from the passport he was known to have taken out. But the fact that he (the reporter) could not produce the picture, which patently could have had no special value in the eyes of its Mexican possessor, casts doubt on the whole story.

However, it is by all odds probable that he was slain by some such band of guerillas and not in battle, nor, despite his sincere championship of the right to suicide, by his own hand. The shadows have closed on his trail and it is of no very great importance where that trail had its end, whether near some humble village of the plain or up in the bare and desolate mountains of Mexico.

In the account by Sterling from which I have quoted the assertion is made that Bierce was known to have taken out a passport. I don't know; but it seems to me passports were not then issued by the United States to persons intending to enter Mexico, and I am of the impression that passports are infrequently, if ever, issued by this country to persons contemplating trips in either Mexico or Canada. I have not made inquiry of the State Department, thinking it hardly desirable to do so, since the probability is very remote that Bierce should have applied for a passport.

VI

During the spring of 1913 (possibly before) Bierce began writing to me and to others that South America had been beckoning to him all his life and that he had about decided to explore that continent. All this was camouflage; in all my long association with Bierce he had not expressed any particular interest in South America. He now simply wished to provide an untrue explanation of his approaching death by his own hand. He would have lived on a bit longer had

he thought that imaginative journalists were going to make a Villa bandit of him. His purpose was so apparent to me (and presumably to others) that I gave very little attention to what he said. He had no plans to discuss, but would vaguely refer to one after another of tentative itineraries, one of which was a journey to be taken by foot and by donkey over the Andes, starting at Santiago and ending at Buenos Aires. No map, no chart, no human companion, no knowledge at all of a most difficult country, in part unexplored!

Bierce was no Roosevelt. While he would frequently take long walks near his domicile, he was usually home within twenty-four hours, and was not generally counted a pedestrian. Nor was he an explorer. He was not even particularly interested in the explorations of others. Furthermore, he was no sportsman with dog and gun, or rod and reel, although he would infrequently engage in such pastimes. I never knew him to go in quest of game while I was in contact with him. Nor was he afflicted by wanderlust. He did not particularly like to travel; with advancing age he hated to take a train, although he was not averse to making a brief sea voyage. That he should have had the least notion of going to South America after he had lived seventy years, is not believable.

In September, 1913, while he was in New York, at the time he was telling me of the gift of the revolver, he began to refer to his mythical journey to the southern continent, and I suggested that he leave off, for I knew his purpose full well. I bluntly asked him if he was about to depart for the Grand Cañon, and his reply was:

"Neale, I will leave you to answer in your own good time a question that I have never been able to solve: Is silence affirmative always? May it not be either negation or affirmation?"

There were several reasons (sufficient to Bierce) why he postponed his exit beyond his seventieth year. I will mention one: For years he had been urging me to take a leisurely tour with him that would embrace the Western battlefields over which he had fought. He was equally keen that his "Ugly Duckling" should be of the party; hence, some chaperon should be along. While I would have gone gladly if I had had the time, I could not be released from my duties long enough to take the extensive journey. During the last year of his life he was particularly insistent. I found it impossible to get off, but suggested that he and his "Ugly Duckling" and a chaperon make the tour. He said he would not go without me, and would get very impatient, put up long arguments in letters, and say that when I had reached his years I would realize that a few weeks taken from business would not count against my prosperity and that the world would move along in its same old ruts. I resisted temptation; my new magazine held me down. He finally despaired of having me as a companion, abandoned his contemplated tour of the battlefields, and doubtless set forth for the Grand Cañon. While I have no knowledge that he revisited the battlefields on his way, he may have done so, alone, and probably did, in view of an interview he seems to have given to a newspaper reporter in New Orleans, November, 1913.

VII

One of the reasons why Bierce went to New York in September, 1913, was to get me to draw up for him various assignments of his different properties to Miss Christiansen, embracing everything he possessed, and I complied with his wishes. To one or more of the assignments either I personally or the publishing house that bears my name was a party, consenting to the transference to Miss Christiansen

of all Bierce's interest in copyrights and royalties of *The Collected Works* and *Write It Right* and in the re-publication rights of various separates and in *The Works*. Some years later, Miss Christiansen, probably aware that her death was impending—although I do not know that she had such knowledge—transferred all the property rights she had acquired from Bierce (in which I was interested) to his daughter Helen—now no longer Mrs. Cowden, but Mrs. Isgrigg, a Mr. Isgrigg being her latest husband.

Before Bierce left on his last long journey, too, he gave away some of his cash to friends, including five hundred dollars to a baby-girl, to be kept for her by her parents until she should become engaged to marry, when that sum and the accumulated interest should be used for the purchase of a trousseau. The little thing was to have been named Ambrose, but was born of the wrong sex, and he frowned upon the suggestion of her parents that she be named Ambrosia. He delivered up five hundred dollars despite her sex, most gladly, and let us hope that the girl will soon have occasion to draw her *dot*.

Several persons have asked me if Bierce might not have killed himself in order to avoid poverty. To all such inquiries my answer has been, "No." At the time of his disappearance he was far from being impecunious; he was not in need of funds; his requirements were simple, his needs less than his requirements, and his income from The Neale Publishing Company alone was sufficient to enable him to live in comfort. Again, his earning capacity as a writer was never greater, and he could have made advantageous connections with a number of publishers. Hearst, no doubt, would have been glad to take him back at the former salary of \$5,200 a year. Indeed, shortly after his disappearance he was sought—by the publisher of one of the leading newspapers—as a war correspondent for Mexico, the publisher

coming to me about the matter. Nor was he without a considerable cash fund when I last saw him, and besides held both stocks and bonds that were as good as cash, including his favorite stock, Mergenthaler, which was always salable during banking hours at a price greater than the sum he had paid for it. As I have said, after giving away considerable sums to different persons shortly before starting on his last journey, he transferred the rest of his property—property of considerable value—to Miss Carrie Christiansen, without consideration other than “love and affection,” as the lawyers put it, and I should say that aside from his income derived from The Neale Publishing Company, from his pension, and other income, including dividends and interest, his cash capital and his stocks and bonds that were readily convertible into cash—his liquid capital, in other words—was sufficient to enable him to live in comfort beyond the years of his expectancy. Certain am I that no pecuniary consideration led to his suicide.

VIII

I am unable to say why Bierce stopped off at different places en route to the Grand Cañon, nor have I any notion of his movements from the time he left Washington until he reached Texas. The first letter that I received from him while he was on his journey was dated at Galveston, I think; but am not quite certain. That city would have been out of his way by the all-rail route; but upon reaching Houston by rail, it was a matter of an hour's ride by train to the seaport. Again, he might have gone by boat from New York to Galveston, and he probably would have taken a steamer, since he enjoyed ocean trips. He had been there at least once, several years before.

His last letters to me were written in December, 1913. He first wrote from Galveston; next from San Antonio, and

a few days later from Laredo, Texas. The two cities last named were along the trunk line, or nearby, and I know that he greatly desired to visit both Eagle Pass and El Paso. He might even have crossed into Mexico at some point, in order to witness a bull fight. He would have been governed by his physical condition, and, if seized by asthma, might have been compelled to interrupt his journey from time to time.

IX

Like others of strong mentality and great physical beauty, Bierce disliked the thought of having his friends and acquaintances and strangers look upon him while in mortal illness and when dead. His aversion to undertakers and their assistants was intense; nor could he tolerate the idea of having his inanimate form handled by anybody.

So, Bierce has died the death he sought. He has been his own undertaker; the mists of the Colorado serve as his shroud; the snows are his pall; the sonorous river still sounds his elegy; the winds of the mountains still chant his requiem; the stars of the heavens are candles at his head and feet; the walls of the Grand Cañon forever sentinel his repose. *Requiescat in pace!*

CHAPTER XXVIII

ON WHAT RESTS HIS FAME

AS a writer Ambrose Bierce achieved distinction early in life, in London and on the Continent, back in the 'seventies, when he was but little more than thirty. In those days fame won abroad by American workers in any of the arts traveled quickly to this country, and, to an appreciable degree, so it is today. The American is still uncertain of his art values; he has to be told by Europe; but it is well to observe that he is beginning to have opinions of his own and to express them.

While fame by hearsay—fame that rests upon the opinions of others—may benefit an artist, it also harms him. Before Bierce returned to America tens of thousands of his countrymen had read about him; but, for lack of opportunity, had not read him; nevertheless, they would discourse volubly on his literary work, and would intentionally lead their listeners to believe that they had read everything that he had published. So it is that countless thousands will discuss with varying degrees of intelligence the literary work of an author whom they have not read, not even a word by him, basing their discussions in part on what others have said orally, but more largely upon the critical articles they have read.

The principal sufferers among authors whose fame is extended by hearsay—extended by those entirely unfamiliar through contact with the works of the authors whom they discuss—are the authors now dead, from Aristotle to Ariosto, on to Goethe, down to Poe. There are several million Americans who would not take shame upon themselves by

admitting that they had never read a line composed by Dante; who would, on the contrary, have you believe that they have read his works thoroughly; nevertheless, I doubt if there are one thousand living Americans who, as adults, have read the *Divine Comedy*, or even a single one of Dante's *Canzoniere*; yet, Dante fares not much worse than do the rest of the classical writers, nor so very much worse than do our own Hawthorne, Poe, and Bierce. When we take into consideration the present low estate of American critical literature, we can understand why the great writers of all time are so little read by our people—and are so little understood by the few who do read them. In common with the great masters of the past and the present, Ambrose Bierce is a victim of hearsay, and his fame, whether good or ill, rests largely on the words of those who have never read a line that he has written, or who have read him but scantily, and, even so, mere fragments of his writings as quoted in the public press, or in books by uninformed writers. Not even yet has a critique of Bierce's literary work as a whole been published, and one or more large volumes would be required to review critically (and adequately) his important output. I hope to find the time to perform this duty to American letters.

What Bierce wrote was not affected by the little critic—not in craftsmanship, not in daring, not in any of the properties that make literature—nor was he deterred from writing anything that he wished to write, nor did he deviate from the course that he had laid out; but Bierce suffered: by being robbed of the audience to which he was entitled; and the world has suffered too, by reason of the non-issuance in book form of the best of his work until recent years, while even now a great deal of his best remains uncollated. I am certain that he wrote for the far future, for himself first, and next for posterity. Yet he *did* lend an ear to cur-

rent opinion. Heaven be thanked that what he heard did not disturb his tranquillity; he "carried on," producing literature the best that he could write, in accordance with the approval of his own highly-developed critical faculties, and this he did unaffected by the uninformed masses, aside from the temporary reactions to the little critics, which but affected him the man, yet probably led him to withhold publication in *The Collected Works* of a great deal of material that surely belongs there. I have not the least doubt that the greater part of his as yet uncollated work will soon be published in book form; and, if destiny permit, I hope to be the publisher, and I shall be the collator as well if nobody else will get the material together. I much prefer that the collating be done by others, however, and there are a number of men and women eminently fitted to do the work, if they be so minded.

Relatively little of *Prattle* is embraced in *The Collected Works*, perhaps for no other reason than the hostile criticism that *Prattle* encountered, based on the idea of the little critics that *Prattle* dealt mainly with ephemeral events and with persons usually of little or no importance. The same little critic would be lost in wonder, would praise inordinately, the satires of Juvenal, of Lawrence Sterne, of Dean Swift, of Cervantes, of Pope, of Lowell, and at the same time not be aware that those writers were largely engaged in satirizing movements and conditions ephemeral and men and women of no consequence. Those authors made the foibles and absurdities they satirized important and elevated into personages the men and the women that they ridiculed. They made of such material literature. Yet, Bierce was as great a satirist as any of those authors, great as they were, and his *Prattle* and his essays possess literary properties shown in the work of no other satirist of any time with whom I am familiar. So thought Scheffauer, so thought

Pollard, the only two of his associates other than myself, who have written of him, thoroughly acquainted with his literary work, and competent to judge. Those who do not know Bierce the satirist will express a contrary opinion, and doubtless will hold that no great master of satire could follow the dead masters, that the art of satire was interred with the bones of the dead satirists. So, while I do not charge Bierce with cowardice, knowing, as I do, that fear was unknown to him—knowing that he lacked neither moral nor physical courage—I am aware that the little critics, with their browbeating methods, their illiteracy, nevertheless affected Bierce to some degree, as they have affected all other great writers. The little critic is not altogether to be despised: the evil he works through his gentle art of suppression is far-reaching: it affects the great among writers despite themselves. Perhaps no author has ever been entirely free from the little critic's discouraging lack of the critical faculty; the futility of contending with ignorance, stamped as wisdom by the crowd, at times temporarily numbs the master's own critical faculty. The little critic's followers are multitudes, while the master among great writers, during his brief mortal span, commands but a negligible few. A negligible few? Yes, until a new generation comes into manhood, and then the few of the last past generation are the only ones whose critical judgments are to be found.

The fame of Ambrose Bierce ultimately will rest upon his literary work as a whole. That his distinction as an author is not confined to his short-stories alone is apparent, for his fame as a writer was firmly established before any of them was written; they but extended his renown. To be sure, I hold these stories to be the greatest ever published in any language, and base my estimate upon a close familiarity with the short-story, not only as written in the Eng-

lish language but in many others. I am not among those who contend that art cannot reach perfection. I believe that perfection has been attained by artists in all the different branches of art, and that the short-stories of Ambrose Bierce are instances of perfect art; nor do I except one story from this critical opinion. But Bierce was a great artist in all that he wrote; he was no better in one branch of literature than he was in another, poetry excepted—and his verse that was not poetry was yet the best of verse. So numerous were his literary activities, embracing so many classifications of literature—more classifications well done than any other author in all time achieved—that I find it impossible to isolate any one classification and say that his fame will endure mainly because of his contributions to that particular field. In every kingdom of art that he entered, poetry excepted, he left ineffaceable vestigia to his fame, and by any one of these footprints the master is revealed and his renown made perpetual.

At times I have been disposed to think that his essays in time would be more largely read than any of his other work; yet, he was equally great in satire, and in his essays we have his satire at its best. He satirized humanity of all time, and particularly that of his own period, showing humanity to be essentially the same in all periods and in all climes. Perhaps these considerations led me to think that in the ages to come his essays would be more largely read than any of his other work. I have reached the point, however, where I think that all that has been published in *The Collected Works*, and nearly all elsewhere published, will be read along with his essays.

Informed critical opinion has its preferences, its aversions, its diversified tastes; consequently, we may expect differences of opinion as to the particular classification of literature upon which Bierce's fame will rest. Those few

who delight in satire will name his satire; a greater number, to whom wit most strongly appeals will found his claim to longevity upon his very great wit; to him who thinks the short-story is the most artistic form of prose fiction—a small tribe but increasing—will say that he will live by his short-stories; the essayist is bound to hold that Bierce the essayist is the man who will live; the logician, in turn, will say that in logic Bierce had no superior and but few peers, and that as a logician he will be handed down to posterity; the masters of verse, who know their prosody, and know how difficult it is to write verse that is truly art, will say that Bierce will be enshrined in the temple where dwell Aristophanes, Scarron, Hood, and Gilbert; they who read parables will say that those written by Bierce were comparable to those uttered by Jesus, with this as an overword, that Bierce's parables were logical in their application, which was not always true of those attributed to the Nazarene; the readers of fables will point to those written by Bierce and will ask if Æsop wrote any better, or if anybody else did; proverbs, epigrams, maxims, others will hold, were never written better by any other, not even by La Rochefoucauld, and that Bierce's would be repeated through the ages; the masters among literary critics will say that Bierce as a critic of poetry was never excelled, not even by Aristotle and our own Poe and Lanier, and that his was constructive criticism and invention to which Aristotle, Poe, and Lanier never gave voice; that, while other critics of literature generally, notably Lessing, Taine, Saintsbury, Birrel, and Brunetière, wrote at greater length and covered topics that Bierce left alone, nevertheless, what Bierce *did* contribute to the literature of criticism of general literature originated with him and added inestimably to creative art in letters. Thus every man to his predilections, each supplying a foundation upon which to rest his opinion as to what

constitutes Bierce's highest claim to fame. These opinions when assembled will all be right: Ambrose Bierce's fame will rest upon his literary work as a whole.

APPENDIX

Ambrose Bierce, in compiling and revising his writings for *The Collected Works*, in a number of instances substituted new titles for those familiar to his readers; consequently, matter that may seem to have been omitted from the twelve volumes may in fact be there under new titles. However, it should be borne in mind that the *collected* are not the *complete* works. As a matter of fact, Bierce rejected much that he had written (by far the greater part), and employed his sense of selectiveness in eliminating a great deal of value that this biographer thinks should have been included in additional volumes.

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